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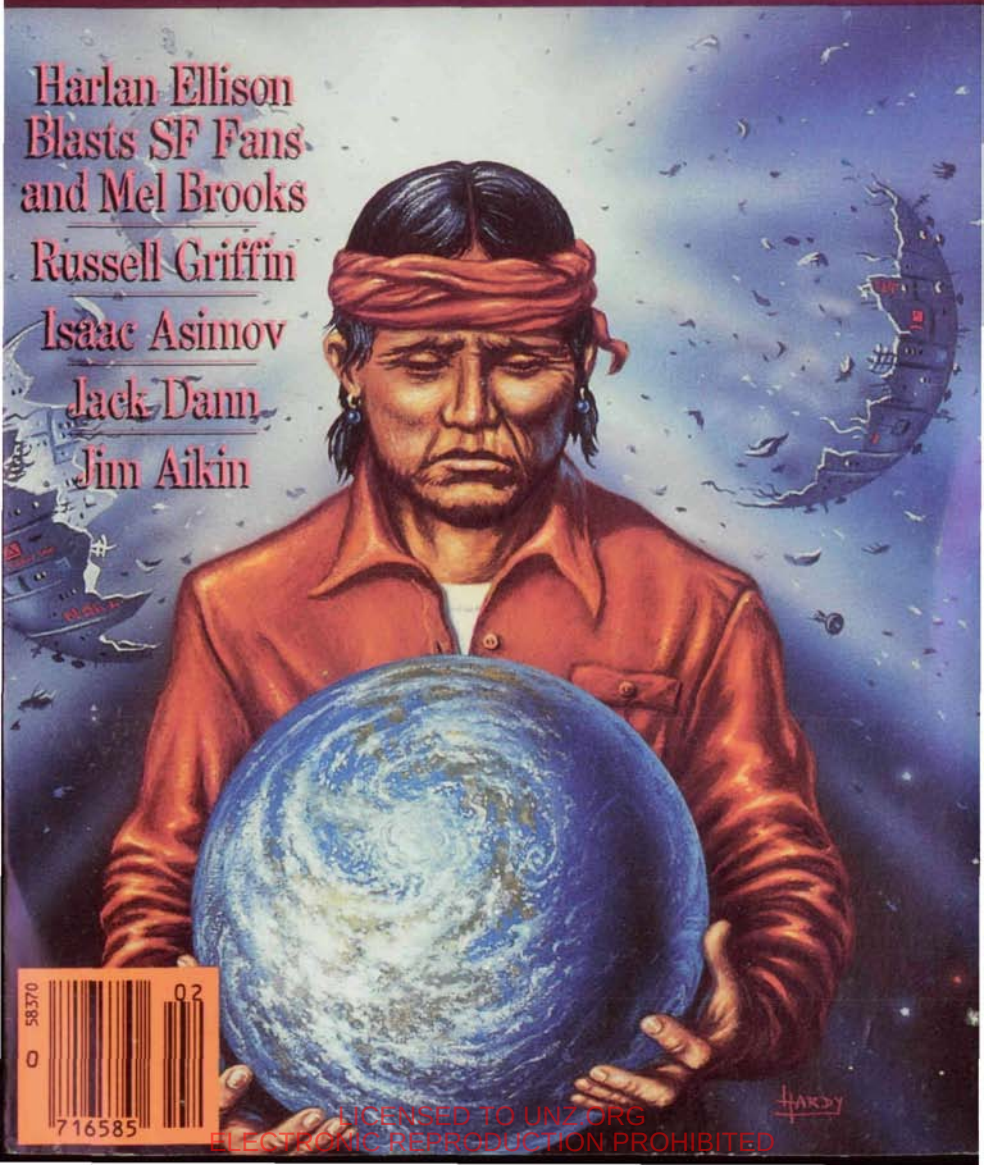

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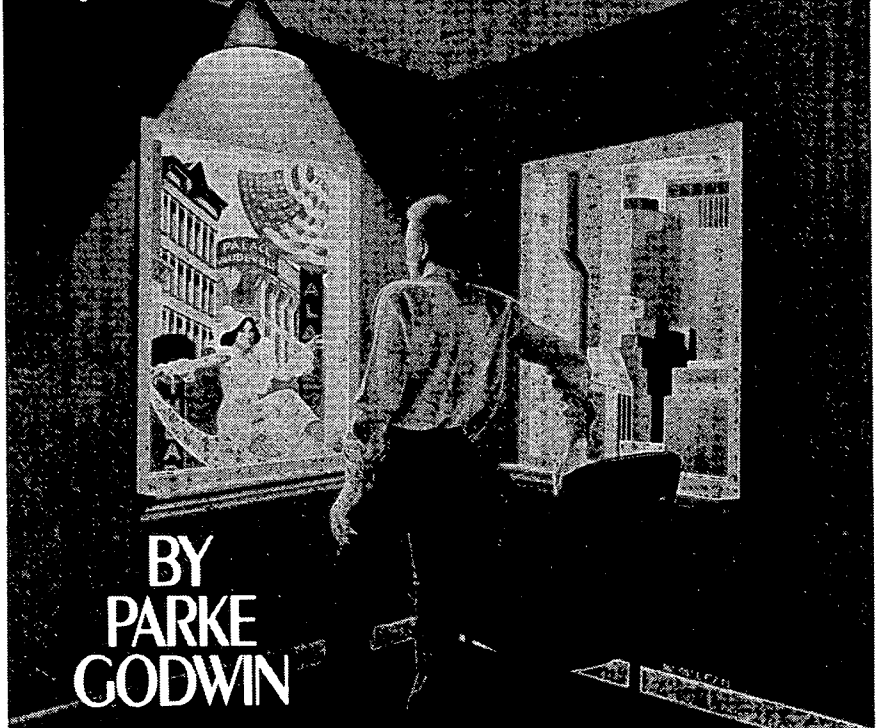

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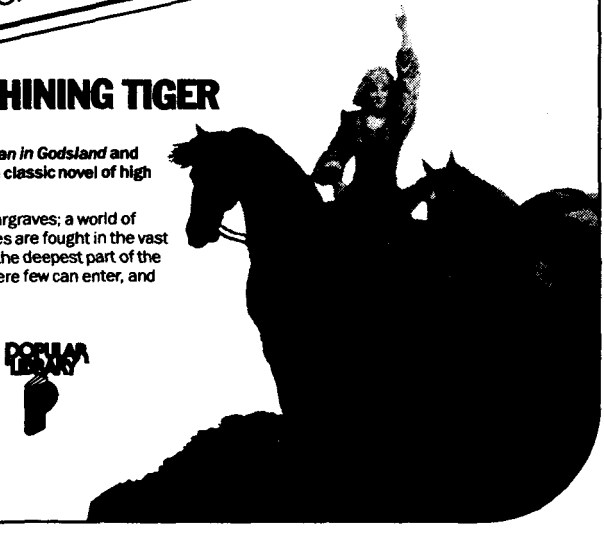

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Children can see beyond reality and find the magic in the world. "The Incredible Christmas Wish" is about such a child. It is a story of wishes made and granted, dreams that might come true . . . in their own way. It tells us that maybe, just maybe, there is a Santa Claus after all. Maybe.

The Incredible Christmas Wish

By Nancy Etchemendy

A WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS, Abbie wandered away and was found by the railroad tracks near the Peninsula Ice Company, chatting with an unsavory old man. The policeman who brought Abbie home described the old man as: "A bum. A transient. You know the type." But Abbie glowered and kept insisting. The man was Santa Claus.

I groaned. "Come on, Abbie. Why don't you grow up?"

Mom shot me a look of warning and held a finger to her lips.

"You think I'm lying, don't you?" shouted Abbie. I could barely keep from laughing. Her voice was deep for a six-year-old's. When she shouted, she sounded like an irate frog.

"Look, if she's old enough to go fooling around with old bums, don't you think she's old enough to know the truth about. . . ," I began.

"Go set the table, please, Marjorie," said Mom.

Dinner that night was tense. Mom tried to look calm and unruffled as

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she passed the broccoli around, but Dad stabbed the roast as if it were his worst enemy.

"What on earth were you thinking of, Abbie?" he asked for the thirty-thousandth time.

"Nothin'," grumbled Abbie.

"We thought you'd been kidnapped or something! Anything could have happened!" Dad shouted, waving his fork and its captive morsel in the air.

Abbie drank her milk placidly. "Everything's fine now. I talked to Santa Claus today. We're gonna have snow for Christmas," she said.

I snorted, and almost got milk up my nose. "Good grief," I said into my napkin.

"It's true!" Abbie retorted.

"It doesn't snow in California," I replied, swallowing fast, afraid I'd laugh with my mouth full. "And you didn't talk to Santa Claus. You talked to a bum by the railroad tracks."

"You'll see," she said, glaring coldly at me. She laid her silverware on her plate and turned toward Mom. "May I go to my room now?"

For a little kid, Abbie had a lot of style. She could be as haughty as English royalty when she wanted to. She sneered at me when she thought nobody was looking. I really had her going.

Mom sighed, and said, "Yes. Go on."

Later, after everyone had gone to bed, I crept back down the stairs in my nightgown and turned on the Christmas tree lights. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled around in the shadows under the tree, rattling gifts. I already had most of my presents figured out. There was a pair of disco roller skates in the big, heavy one. There were lots of books and clothes and stuff, and I was pretty sure the long, flat box had a new tennis racket in it. The really big present, though, the ten-speed bike, was still in its carton up in the rafters in the garage where Dad thought I'd never look. They were probably going to bring it out on Christmas Eve after we were asleep, and put a label on it that said it was "from Santa."

Most of Abbie's gifts were mysteries to me. I shook them and poked at them. The trouble was, Abbie hadn't asked for anything this Christmas. She kept saying that all she wanted was snow on Christmas Day.

I got up and looked out the window. There was a palm tree in our front yard, right next to a lemon tree full of big yellow lemons. It would be really strange to see those trees covered with snow.

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I picked a candy cane from Mom's carefully arranged mantel decoration and chewed it slowly. Abbie was having a hard time in California. It had been over six months since we'd moved from Minneapolis. As far as I was concerned, our new home seemed like heaven. The other girls at the junior high school I went to were friendly, even to a new kid like me. And the California boys were almost uniformly gorgeous. It was nearly January, and our winter clothes were still in mothballs. There'd been one light frost so far, early one morning. Later the same day, I'd been playing tennis outdoors in a T-shirt and shorts. Minneapolis seemed like a freezing nightmare in comparison.

But Abbie didn't see it that way. All through autumn she waited for the leaves to turn color. Toward the end of November, one of the walnut trees down the street finally turned brown and the leaves fell off. The owner said it was because it had a disease.

Since then, Abbie had been waiting stubbornly for the first snowfall. She wanted to build a snowman, and she wanted to go ice skating. She kept asking when the pond in the park would freeze over. Now there was this business about Santa Claus and the white Christmas. I really hated to admit it, but I was beginning to think my little sister was totally out to lunch. I turned off the tree lights, put the candy cane back in the arrangement with the eaten end inward, and sneaked back up the stairs to bed.

A couple of days passed. One night we went down to the mall to do a little last-minute shopping. Mom wanted to get a box of cheese for the mailman, and Dad wanted to get some special golf balls for his boss.

While they were at Macy's, I was supposed to take Abbie to see Santa Claus, who was sitting in the center of the mall inside a little white cage made of garden trellises. We stood in line for a while. The really tiny kids were all too scared to sit on his lap. A lot of them were screaming. He kept saying, "Ho, ho, ho! Ho, ho, ho!" Once I saw him look up at the ceiling and roll his eyes. It must have been an awful job.

When we were third in line, Abbie looked at me and said very loudly in her deep voice, "Is it O.K. if we go now?"

"I thought you wanted to see Santa Claus. I was trying to be nice to you," I said.

"Look, I know the real Santa Claus when I see him, and that guy's a

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"Look. I know the real Santa Claus when I see him, and that guy's a fake."

fake," croaked Abbie. "No phony Santa Claus is going to make a fool out of *me*."

A whole bunch of people turned around and started staring at us. I thought I would die. I grabbed Abbie by the arm and led her away from the crowd.

"I don't believe this," I said, trying to keep my voice down. "You still think that old bum was Santa Claus, don't you?"

"Just because he wasn't wearing a red jacket and boots doesn't mean he wasn't Santa Claus." Her eyes blazed like two miniature fires. She was convinced — completely, totally convinced. All at once, I hated that bum.

Abbie and I were still arguing when the four of us got in the car to go home. I wanted to make her see the truth about the bum by the railroad tracks. Most of all, I wanted to keep her from being disappointed on Christmas morning. But finally, Dad told us both to be quiet if we couldn't say anything nice, and I had to give up. Abbie wouldn't budge.

At 5:30 on Christmas morning, Abbie padded softly into my bedroom. It was still dark. As I snuggled in my warm blankets, I could hear the pleasant thrum of heavy rain outside the window.

Abbie shook my shoulder. "Are you awake?" she whispered.

"No!" I groaned, and hid my head under the cover.

"It didn't snow," said Abbie very softly. "Can I get into bed with you?"

"Huh?" I sat up and looked at the clock. "Don't you want to go down and see what Santa Claus left for us?"

"No. I don't feel like it anymore." She sniffled quietly in the dark. "I wanna go home."

"Oh Abbie, come here." She climbed up on the bed and got in under the blankets. Her feet were like icicles.

I hugged her, and she cried, covering her eyes.

I hated playing the game. Somebody should have told her the truth long ago. Then none of this would have happened. But I knew this wasn't the time for major truths. I felt sorry for her.

"Sometimes Santa just *can't* give us everything we ask for. He has to do

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what's best for the most people. If it snowed, a lot of palm trees and fruit trees would die. Maybe the water pipes would even freeze. They don't even have snowplows here. Believe me, there'd be a lot of very sad people around. Santa can't just go around making people sad."

"He made *me* sad!" she cried.

"Look . . . ," I began.

But just then, in the dark, quiet shadows downstairs, we heard the front doorknob rattle, followed by the unmistakable squeaking of hinges. A prickle went up my spine.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"It's the front door," hissed Abbie. Her eyes were wide.

I jumped out of bed, grabbing the closest heavy object I could find, my terrarium.

At the head of the stairs, we could hear the noise of the rain coming through the open door. In the dim morning light, we made out a dark figure standing by our Christmas tree.

I gathered my courage and stepped forward, quickly flipping on the living room lights. "What do you think you're doing here?" I blurted. My voice was high and squeaky, and I felt like a fool.

The man turned toward us. He had on a battered gray hat, a threadbare overcoat, and a worn-out pair of soaking-wet sneakers. His wrinkled face was framed with white hair and a long white beard, straggly and dripping with rain. Under one arm he had a big brown box.

"It's him!" cried Abbie. "It's Santa Claus!"

"What're you talking about? It's a burglar!" I shouted. "Mom! Dad!"

The old bum laid a finger across his chapped lips. He set the box hurriedly under the tree, then doffed his hat and said, "Merry Christmas, Abbie."

Then he disappeared out the door, leaving puddles of rainwater behind him in the entryway.

"Wait!" shouted Abbie, flinging the door open again. But the old man was nowhere to be seen.

I stooped beside the brown carton. It was made of corrugated cardboard that looked wet but felt dry and waxy. The corners were bent and chewed. It had seen better days. I picked it up and shook it. Inside, something heavy shifted ever so slightly.

"What is it?" cried Abbie breathlessly.

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There was a label on the top, printed in ornate but rather shaky script. It said:

VIRGIN SNOW
A Carefully Blended Mixture
from the Ice Fields of Tibet.

Lines of Oriental writing showed faintly through from the other side of the thin paper.

"I guess it's . . . it's snow," I stammered. I had never been so totally amazed in my life.

"Snow!" yelled Abbie, ripping off the sealing tape.

"What's going on down there?" Mom's sleepy voice drifted down the stairway.

But neither of us could answer. Inside the carton was a little wooden box with a hand-carved lid, scratched and scarred in a dozen places. It was carefully packed in steaming dry ice. In a haze of vapor, Abbie opened the wooden box.

We leaned forward, relishing the sudden fragrance of raw, lonely stone, frozen blue sky, winds snatched from the jet stream. I caught my breath and blinked.

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Abbie plunged her hands in, speechless with delight. Up came a spray of frosty white crystals.

After Christmas dinner, Abbie drew pictures by the fire while I was out on the porch getting the feel of my new tennis racket. I overheard Mom and Dad talking as they did the dishes.

"Honey," said Dad, "it was probably just shaved ice."

"I suppose so," Mom replied, sounding thoughtful. "But then, we don't really know what Tibetan snow looks like."

Dad snorted. "Don't tell my you fell for *that* line. The guy's an old tramp. Where's he gonna get Tibetan snow?"

"You're probably right, dear," sighed Mom. "Still, it was awfully nice of him to go to all that trouble."

I swung the tennis racket, and thought of all the trains that go up and down California, and wondered where Abbie's friend might be tonight. He might be in Gilroy or Salinas by now.

I swung the racket once more. Then again, he might be at the North Pole.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Essential Ellison, Terry Dowling, with Richard Delap and Gil Lamont, eds., Nemo Press, $29.95 trade, $60.00 deluxe (The Nemo Press, 1205 Harney St., Omaha, NE 68102)

THE ESSENTIAL thing about Harlan Ellison is that he can't be other than what he declares himself to be. And part of that is an immense dedication to guttiness.

Ellison pioneered gonzo SF. The universe of speculative fiction had seen times of fervor and ferment before his arrival on the professional scene, and we have seen them since. But not until after he established and successfully promulgated his personal style did we ever see the phenomenon in which it's taken as a matter of course that a person would not just be a newcomer, but would be vociferous.

There are still plenty of people who just break in with interesting or at least acceptable new work, go on doing it, develop it if they can, and, in short, do pretty much what new writers had been doing. If they pursue fights, they do it in some manner that does not involve mailing dead gophers to opponents.* Even the pre-War Futurians, with any number of intense intellectual involvements in addition to those of art, only rarely brought matters to the pitch that our times now have learned to consider the routine emotional level. In the general view of matters, the Futurians were considered extraordinary.

By contrast, it's now ordinary to expect that a new writer would not attach himself to some emerging new way of going, but would vociferate on behalf of a doctrinaire view of how their things are and how unjust all other things are.

What we have gotten since Ellison's onset — and I doubt if Ellison ever dreamed it would work out quite the way it has, or intended it to — is art in the service of doc-

**There's also the story of the time Ellison simply walked out with an electric typewriter from the office of a stubbornly late-paying publisher.*

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trine, and art designated as belonging to some other doctrine and precipitously put on trial not as art but as doctrine.

What Ellison has gotten, in addition to all his other burdens, is an incidental series of bitter clashes with people, notably among those whom Gardner Dozois named Cyberpunks, whom future historians may well describe as his children. At bottom, those clashes appear to be taken by Ellison not as simple workings-out of the pecking order among gonzoes, and in that I think he is right. Something subtler and more interesting, and far more personally threatening to him, is going on. Somewhere in here, I will try to acquaint you with my thoughts on what it actually is. But whatever it is, he started it.

Perhaps we were ready to have someone start it. Somewhere in that possibility is why this whole thing is so interesting; if found, it may tell us something significant about ourselves. And that's why it's worth taking up your time with it here, because all that other stuff, though noisy, and vitally important to the parties involved, means zilch to those of us who just want something good to read and never mind its author's motives.

All that jazz, we are almost certainly right in saying, is O.K. one way or the other if it spins-off work worth the money and attention we bring to it. And if it doesn't, we can always ignore it, just as we can browse through a gallery and never even be aware of what Picasso thought of Kandinsky, or how loudly and where he expressed it.

Define term: "Gonzo SF."

Ellison was the first prominent author published in fantasy and science fiction magazines to steadily assert that the materials of his scenarios were torn directly from his life. On the model later popularized by Hunter Thompson reporting on the inner workings of the Hell's Angels, Ellison verisimilitudinously claimed to have participated in harrowing events which allowed him to not only observe the human condition but to feel a significant instance of it working in his gut. This began as an early tendency to write some — sometimes strikingly effective — non-SF,* and soon worked itself over into SF material in which a science-fiction or fantasy element was used to pointedly allegorize the real event.

This is still the view of what SF is really for, I am told, among an

*And often, in the early days, some non-SF markedly derivative of the juvenile-delinquency motif of novelist Hal (no relation) Ellson.

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entire generation of U.K. writers who followed on the generation of the New Wave and are just old enough to have seen what Ellison was doing at that time. Even if this isn't quite as true as generality makes it, there's always the career and attitude of Norman Spinrad to look at.

The thing that Spinrad seemed to have learned from Ellison, and often published in the U.K.'s *New Worlds* magazine by preference to the media of his native U.S., was that one didn't just write a gripping tale; one found its significance, and one enhanced and dramatized its significance by railing at a world in which such things could be. Furthermore, the railing was often to be done in public as distinguished from in the text of the story itself.*

It's Ellison the individual often on the public scene, in person or in polemic essays, who lends as much to, for instance, "I Have no Mouth And I Must Scream," as Ellison the impassioned workman at the typewriter. It is considered important by some, reading "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," to be aware of Ellison's often poignant interchanges with women; interchanges which Ellison himself has made public. And it continues to be Ellison's self-described love-hate relationship with Hollywood that contributes heavily to making his column here such gripping reading.*

Ellison to all intents and purposes invented and established the SF writer as public activist. He casts himself as a participant, tossing aside the earlier model of writer-as-intelligent-and-ingenious-observer. He has done nothing to denigrate the value of observation and intelligence; if anything, he has heightened them. But he has burst out of the laboratory — and he was in it only for a few moments, as his comment on his first pro SF story, "Glowworm," indicates — and into the street. Acuteness of observation is not enough for him; blood

**And even the text of such Spinrad career-landmark novels as* The Men in The Jungle *and* Bug Jack Barron *clearly values outcry more than diction.*

**The acute observations, often genuinely and valuably overturning the consensus on whether a given film is an artistic failure, or finding the golden moment in among the thousands of frames of dross, might conceivably be made by others as acute in these perceptions.† What makes the Ellison column uniquely meaningful is our absolute conviction that Ellison went there and saw that and heard and said that; it is a conviction based on what Ellison has told us not about his thinking but about his life.*

†Do you really believe such a person could exist?

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must be spilled, to validate it as if upon an altar.

This smoky, sputtering, intrinsically mystical fervor is his legacy — Ah, no, no, he will be with us for quite some time, yet, but the fortune one leaves behind is one that began accruing long ago — and it is arguably what later generations have modelled their own behavior upon. Perhaps more accurately, it is what the entire community has used to model its perception of what is acceptable behavior in the arts.

There are those who feel — there are those who felt all along — that there is something "wrong" in the way Ellison behaves. But few are immune to his charm, which proceeds not from his often transparent attempts at winsomeness but from something perceptibly genuine in him, under the postures. I think why such a model of gentlemanly behavior as Isaac Asimov, for instance, is so tenacious of his friendship with Harlan, is something like the reason why I am. It is not that Harlan shows us something we didn't know, or cares about things we are indifferent to. It is rather that he presents a case for being totally unguarded. He does not evade or forestall the schoolyard bullyings that follow us all far beyond the precincts and years of P.S. 87. We all know that the bully would kill us, given the proper circumstances, and most of us take prudent steps in that regard. Harlan has another way of dealing with it, and it isn't that he asserts he's too tough for the bully to kill, no matter how often he's battered. Rather, he asserts that he's easy to kill, and therefore the bully is powerless to accomplish anything of significance.

In order to understand Harlan, we have to understand that we were waiting for someone to prove that to us and give it meaning. If we understand that, we come close, finally, to understanding why Harlan despises being called "a science fiction (or fantasy) writer." He is an uttering individual who speaks of matters that may be uniquely poignant to SF-inclined human beings, as perhaps distinguishable from SF readers.

So it is not that Harlan's "internecine" contentions with some younger writers are an attempt to demonstrate that he is foremost among them. Their performances are fueled by a similarly often justified conviction that they have significant talent and something important to say, and their behavior has clearly had its trail broken for it in a swath that will never heal and probably shouldn't, but their mission is largely on behalf of an intellectual construct, whereas Har-

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lan's has always been principally personal to his instincts. To quarrel with them purely for primacy would be to contend for the position of having an army under him; to be strongest among the killables.

You doubt the degree of weight I have ascribed to this career? *The Essential Ellison*, a handsomely made, massive small-press volume, is the place to go look at it. Australian critic Terry Dowling has here put together a book of Ellison fictions and utterances from his beginnings to the present day — and some fascinating photos and Ellison's own teen-age drawings — which to my mind come as close to describing an artist as anyone human could do. Assisted by the knowledgeable Richard Delap, facilitated by the meticulous editing of Gil Lamont, dressed with a Dillon cover that stretches even Leo and Diane's previous achievements in the genre of illustrating Ellison, this is to my mind the most significant book of the year in the SF field.

There has been talk of finally tightening up the Hugo Award rules to eliminate the persistent appearance of fiction in the "Best nonfiction about SF" category. I respectfully request that this otherwise advisable tidying-up be sufficiently delayed.

* * *

Alfie Bester has died. Some of his best SF, which is some of the world's best SF, first appeared here. So did some book reviewing which I much appreciated.

He is best known as the author of *The Demolished Man*, a book-length work which continues to entertain and heavily impress SF readers. It first appeared as a magazine serial in the early 1950s and may never die.

Entertainment apart, it was Bester who showed the entire community of writers how to spark a major piece of work by having it leap from idea to idea. His habit of always carrying a notebook, and jotting down in it every stray potentially fruitful idea that occurred to him during the day, became a fetish among the younger and some of the older. SF has not been the same since then, although, like all other innovators in our literature, he did not supplant any older forms; he simply added a new way of going to all the pre-existing ones. Others have built on, and beside, what he caused to come into being. But particularly in Bester's case, the possibility of his being supplanted or replaced is vanishingly remote.

And it is a tribute to Alfred Bester's behavior and his deportment as an artist that no one who had ever so much as been in the same room with him ever called him Alfred.

Vale atque ave.

* * *

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

The Secret Ascension, Michael Bishop (TOR, cloth, 339 pp, $16.95)

AFTER WEEKS of thought, I am still of two minds about this book, and so I must give it two reviews — both truthful, yet maddeningly opposite.

Review #1: Bishop's own title for this novel is *Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas.* I have little patience with literary homage, and the four-page prologue was as bad a piece of silly author worship as I've ever seen. But that worshipful tone disappears the moment the story actually begins, and I urge you simply to skip the section called "Prelude." It really isn't part of the book.

The Secret Ascension is set in an alternative version of the 1980s, one in which there was no Watergate and Richard Milrose (not Milhous) Nixon managed to impose a kind of fascism on America during four terms in office.

Bishop's greatest strength has always been his ability to create characters who are believable and believably good people. His knack does not let him down here. We first explore this darker version of our world through the eyes of Cal and Lia Pickford. Cal is a former Colorado cowboy now working in a pet store in Atlanta. He has two secrets: one is his collection of samizdata manuscripts of the banned science fiction novels of noted mainstream writer Philip K. Dick; the other, which he keeps even from himself, is the terrible way his parents died.

Lia, his wife, is a therapist trying to establish a practice. She came to Atlanta, uprooting them from a decently happy life in Colorado, to be near her aging, dying parents. This is the kind of character Bishop excels with: good people who are willing to make quiet sacrifices for others, to take responsibility for them.

Weaving among the living characters is Bishop's wonderful version of Philip K. Dick himself, dead but still quite busy trying to save the world. Bishop makes Dick the most funny yet endearing angel since Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life.*

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More than any other Bishop novel I've read, *The Secret Ascension* excels as a *story*. There is tension and danger from beginning to end. Perhaps this is a product of the justified paranoia Bishop deliberately borrows from Dick; or perhaps it is because this novel is more visceral, less cerebral than Bishop's earlier works. Whatever the source of the change, it marks, I believe, an important threshold in the writing of Michael Bishop. He has heretofore been a writer's writer, creating beautiful stories that somehow never achieved the level of intensity to make impassioned readers pass tattered paperbacks from hand to hand. This time, however, the climax is not just an inward epiphany for a character; the audience does not *have* to read the story thoughtfully. In *The Secret Ascension*, the world changes in wonderful strange ways, and the audience can read the book passionately, with sweating fingers, eager to see what happens next, yet reluctant to leave the present moment.

Imagine: A writer who is already one of the best, taking risks and finding ways to be better. A damn fine book, boys and girls.

Review #2: Every literary generation has its cheap villains, stereotyped characters that will make the audience boo and hiss the moment they appear onstage. It was the greedy banker in 19th-century melodrama; in 1970s science fiction, it was the Big Nasty Corporation; and right now, the most common cheap villain is a Falwellian or Bakkeroid TV preacher.

But I don't think there's any surer sign of authorial laziness or smugness than taking potshots at Richard Nixon. He's the easy anti-icon of our time, the man you can hate without having to explain why.

Bishop's hallmark in earlier works has been his refusal to create one-dimensional villains. He insists on empathizing with the bad guys, so that even when we know that what they're doing is wrong, perhaps evil, we can still understand how they justify their actions to themselves.

However, Bishop's version of Nixon is, not a character, but a caricature. It excuses nothing to say that Bishop is creating an alternate history, or making a political point, or "just writing fiction." The character is Nixon, Bishop makes a monster out of him, and it turns his otherwise fine novel into an exercise in falsehood.

What if a conservative had written a novel set in 1945, with Franklin Roosevelt, at the beginning of *his* fourth term, having established a horrible, repressive Communist dictatorship in the United States,

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murdering farmers in the American midwest the way Stalin starved and slaughtered the kulaks of the Ukraine? Would we not call such a book a cheap, mean-spirited political hatchet job?

And if the book ended with a repulsive scene in which Roosevelt was revealed to be, not human at all, but a wheelchair-bound monster, Satan himself, would we not dismiss the author of that book as a dishonest, unprincipled demagogue?

Yet to Roosevelt's enemies he seemed every bit as dangerous as Nixon seemed to his. Roosevelt actually *did* run for four terms; he really *did* try to pack the Supreme Court. But no author, however earnest his political beliefs, could write a story about FDR so devoid of intelligence and compassion without forfeiting at least some of the respect of his peers.

The difference is, so many of Bishop's peers agree with him in his hatred of Richard Nixon that few will take him to task. Those who do will certainly be accused of liking Nixon (just as those who opposed McCarthy were accused of being pro-Communist). But as far as I can see, pinheadedness of the Left is not better than pinheadedness of the Right. It's the same disease — the refusal to believe that your opponent *might* be reasonable, temperate, unselfish, sincere. Yet when you refuse to admit that your enemy is even *human*, then it strikes me that *you*, not your enemy, are the dangerous one.

Most frustrating of all — the reason why I'm mentioning this at all, instead of simply ignoring the book — is the fact that Michael Bishop knows better. And in this novel he could have done better. He could have provided some sort of illumination, as he does in every other work of his I've read: a compassionate explanation of the human heart. There is nothing in the first two-thirds of the book that would stop Bishop from enlightening us, not until page 286, where he begins his downhill slide into cheapness by using the hoariest cliche of all — to show us that his villain is *really* bad, he has Nixon planning to start an unprovoked nuclear war.

Too many stupid stories have used the stock character of the madman who wants to blow up the planet. This pseudo-menace might still have a place in Saturday morning cartoons, but not in a book by Michael Bishop. And it is indecent of him to suggest that Richard Nixon — who is, after all, a real human being, not a fictional construct — would ever desire the destruction of the world. How would Bishop feel if someone put *him* in a story and accused him of wanting such a thing? The poetic license

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Bishop was issued at birth gives him the right to say what he pleases; but I don't think it's right to use that right to deny another human being's humanity, even in the supposedly harmless realm of fiction.

Irreconciliation: Because this book is wonderfully well made, those who believe in art for art's sake and deny that stories should be judged on moral grounds will delight in *The Secret Ascension*. So will those who hate Nixon beyond reason. But those who believe that it is the moral dimension of stories that makes them worth telling and hearing in the first place will be uncomfortable with a book that perpetrates the literary equivalent of a lynching.

Analog Presents: "Thunder and Roses" by Theodore Sturgeon; "Rockabye Baby" by S.C. Sykes, Bob Sessions, reader (Listen For Pleasure, Inc., 25 Mallard Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 1S4; 2 audiocassettes; $14.95)

Since I'm commuting four hours a week this fall through a radio-barren stretch of North Carolina, I though it was a golden opportunity to listen to books and stories on cassette. This selection of two stories from *Analog* caught my eye, mainly because, though "Rockabye Baby" was one of the best stories of 1985, it is also a very static, cerebral story — not at all one that ought to work well read aloud.

I was right and I was wrong. "Rockabye Baby" is a terrific story no matter what; but the action and attitude of "Thunder and Roses" make it clear how much better an action story works when read aloud. Unfortunately, "Thunder and Roses" is so deeply tied to the 1950s that it has lost its immediacy; there are constant reminders that, although some of the political issues are still alive, the characters were created to live in a world we have long since left behind us.

Still, it delivers a strong message about acting for the good of humanity instead of for national pride; and "Rockabye Baby" is still a searing story of a man forced to choose between keeping his memories or remaining a quadriplegic. Bob Sessions does a good job of reading, though he sometimes uses funny voices as a substitute for dramatic interpretation of characters.

I'm a great believer in oral storytelling. The strengths of these productions encourage me about possibilities, and the flaws point out all the more clearly how far storytellers have moved from oral language in their written stories.

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This is the last story Russell Griffin sent to us before his untimely death in 1986. Much of Mr. Griffin's prose was humorous, and he wrote that this story grew from "my looking through a copy of Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper *for August 5, 1861. At the back I came across "Humorous Gleanings" and was struck by the fact that there wasn't anything that would coax a smile out of the the modern reader. So I began to speculate on how ephemeral humor really is. . ."*

Takes All Kinds

By Russell Griffin

HE JUST HAPPENED to catch her image reflected in his readerscreen, stepping into the doorframe's square of blinding sunlight as the library door *shushed* open, the kind of woman you could die for.

Elmo could, anyway, because if there was one thing he found harder to get than jokes, it was women.

When God handed out the confidence, he was behind the eight—

Damn! He bit his lip and looked furtively left and right, shoulders hunched. What was he afraid of? He hadn't said it out loud, had he? And the cops hadn't figured a way into your head — not yet, anyway. He was free to add her to his memory hoard, one diamond among his endless, pebble-gray facts.

A photographic memory was hell — completely undiscriminating. It captured the dull with the same clarity as the interesting, and most things that came his way were threadbare and dull as an old man's bathrobe.

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Still, as long as he kept his mouth shut, she'd never laugh at him. Or worse, pity him. As long as he just watched her reflection, she'd never even know he was looking at her.

And boy, was he ever looking. Framed in the doorway, confident every male eye was riveted on her, pretty as a pic—

He leaned farther forward in his chair, forgetting there was some kind of air pocket in the vinyl seat cushion that exhaled noisily every time he shifted his weight.

Bhuflubbadafluth-uth-uth-wheeze.

Heads snapped throughout the echoing vastness of the ancient reading room. The leggy, gray-haired matron with the browned tennis arms reading up on dog breeding; the weedy academic behind his crenellated piles of fiches so obscure they'd never been computerized; the wino in the stained sweatshirt for his alcohol-slowed circulation hiding out to preserve his pallor; the two teenage boys looking up something under Anatomy. Even the prim little librarian by the outgate X ray stared disapprovingly down his nose as though a flatulent chair were Elmo's fault instead of the library staff's.

But when he looked again for her, the door had *shushed* back like a shutter, winking his screen dark and empty as his life.

Well, almost. It still showed a page of *Captain Billy's Whiz Bang* in livid orange on black. And he'd better get cracking if he didn't want to wind up in the jug again.

No rest for the—

What was the matter with him? After all his promises to avoid those clichés like the pla—

Did he want to spend his life in the clink? He concentrated on the writhing orange letters of his screen until they untangled into:

Q: How many make a million?

All right, he'd bite.

A: Very few.

What? Anybody knew a million was made up of a thousand thousand of whatever you were counting. Maybe going to old books was a mistake.

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But with all the emphasis on originality, his only hope was jokes so old nobody'd guess they weren't his in a million— Well, at least he was good at the memorizing part. But could humor have changed over the centuries?

He peeked surreptitiously into his jacket pocket for the sandwich he'd packed. It always helped his thinking to chew on something.

Hm . . . peanut butter and green pepper slices on pumpernickel.

His mother had always sent him to school every day with a nice peanut-butter-and-pepper sandwich in his lunch box. It wasn't till he went away to college that he found you didn't *have* to have heartburn at 1:30 every afternoon. Now every morning before work (he was a sports announcer's statistics man), he'd found himself making them for his lunchbox. They really sort of grew on yo—

Aha! That pepper was just the brain food he'd needed. The joke was a what-do-you-call-it, a play on words — how many items *comprised* a million of anything, *and* how many *people earned* a million *dollars*.

What was so funny about that? The average slob pulled down a million five point seven a year in Sun Belt metro areas, a million two seven three along the San Andreas shore, even a million one in the New York wastes.

Hold it! Mr. Perfect Memory and he was forgetting the salary differentials for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Now where had he run into that? Another old book he'd scanned for jokes — *Average Annual Earnings by Occupation and County in the United Kingdom, 1880–1897*, left-hand side, page 436, average female worker in Manchester:

Salary per week	13s. 6½d.
Rent to parents (room & board)	9s. 1d.
Clothes	1s. 8¼d.
Amusements	1d.
Holidays and picnics	3½d.
Education	3¼d.
Net discretionary weekly income	1s. 1d.

Or, converted to annual dollars . . . one old shilling times, um . . . carry the thruppence ha'penny . . . well, probably a lot less than a million.

Not all that funny, but he zapped it into his picoputer when the librarian wasn't looking so he could run it past his cousin Art to find out whether it was too shopworn. Art had a real sense of humor, but he'd never turn Elmo in.

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After all, blood was thicker than—

He bit down hard on his lip, then glanced up to find her again. She was looking something up in the card catalog, though what a bunch of screens and ergonomic keyboards had to do with cards was beyond him.

Wait — right side of page . . . 348, *Literary Habits of Ralph Waldo Emerson, with an Appendix of Borrowings by His Circle of Friends from the Card Catalogues of the Boston Atheneum and Public Libraries Alphabetically and by Date* — yes! They'd kept track of oldstyle books with little *cards.*

But talk about duds — there hadn't been more than three or four laughs in the whole book.

He couldn't help himself. He had to get in for a closer look at her. She was irresistable, a candle he had to circle closer and closer like a smitten moth.

Actually, it was the moth's dorsal muscles that contracted along the hotter side, causing the peculiar corkscrew—

He'd pretend he needed a drink from the bubbler just behind the card catalog's high-voltage cables, that was it. He brushed the sandwich crumbs off his lips just in case the librarian had seen him chewing suspiciously, and rose slowly from his chair.

Ezeehw-thu-thu-thufladabbulfhub.

He froze like a lizard caught in the open, hoping no one would see him if he stayed perfectly motionless. Talk about sticking out like a sore thu—

Argh! Nearly bit through his lip that time. But at least everyone had lost interest in him. He took a deep breath and stepped forward.

Skritch.

He looked to see who was making the noise, saw no one, and launched himself forward.

Skritch skritch skritch.

It was him! Crepe shoes. Damn — he'd forgotten he'd put them on this morning.

Skritch skritch skritch he went miserably across the endless waste of carpet toward the faraway fountain, followed by every set of eyes in the room.

Except hers. Her attention was fixed on the little librarian fluttering about her at the fiche chute. The man caught her order as it skimmed out, checked the title, and peered balefully down his nose through an imagi-

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nary pair of wire-rimmed pince-nez at Elmo before leaning over to whisper something to her. She gave Elmo a shocked look and turned away.

He wanted to give up that instant, but it was too humiliating. He had to finish the whole wretched *skritching* trek. At the bubbler at last, he ducked down, banged his upper teeth on the germ shield, took a gulp, raised his head, felt three or four drips ready to drop from his lower lip, raised his arm to wipe them on his sleeve, caught himself, tried to get them with his tongue and drooled, glanced around hoping no one had seen and knowing everybody had, and *skritch-skritch-skritched* back to his carrel.

And sat down.

Buhflubbadafluth-uth-uth-wheeze.

Somehow his agonized and rolling eyes caught hers again. She blushed and turned away so quickly her shoulder bag roundhoused the pile of fiches from the librarian's hand and sent them showering like autumn leaves to the floor. Her face burned scarlet.

No wonder. She wasn't used to looking clumsy.

Him — he was a rock. He'd made clumsiness a life's work, and his memory had treasured up every moment of every embarrassment in silver-halide perfection. He was long past blushing.

He pretended to be concentrating on his screen to spare her.

Sometimes it didn't seem fair.

He'd tried to understand, really. And he did, intellectually, at least. The less people had to work, the more important the quality of life had become, and the more conversation had regained its place as the art it had been for the leisured class of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But to make bad jokes, fatuous expressions, and dead metaphors illegal, to make being boring a misdemeanor . . . well, he supposed it made as good sense as censoring TV to keep people from murdering each other during prime time every night. That's what the sociologists claimed — you had to legislate life's improvements if you wanted them to work.

But was it his fault he'd been born with no sense of humor? Might as well pass law against all birth defects, like the ancient Spartans throwing deformed children off a cliff (in Laconia in the southeast Peloponnesus, whench the expression "laconic" — Jorge Tuttleflute, *You Funny English Words*, chapter 5, page 672, second column — no jokes in that sucker, either). Why not make it illegal to be born crippled or blind?

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Because they had hydraulic arms and legs; they had photoelectric eye implants. But they didn't have polypropylene senses of humor.

Q: Of what did Job's wardrobe consist?
A: Three wretched comforters.

Great, Captain Billy.

Q: What's the difference between a glass of gin and a glass of water?
A: About ten cents.

Hm. This wasn't getting him anywhere. He sent *Captain Billy* into the ether and tried the next couple he'd queued. First was *Rattling Ford Jokes.* It was so obscure it was just a fiche — except, to his surprise, the inventory slip on the sleeve showed somebody'd had it out recently. Maybe the professor had no sense of humor, too? Was this title what the librarian had whispered to her? Had she guessed why he needed it? Glumly, he watched his machine suck in the little wafer of text.

Q: Do you know why the Flivver is the perfect family car?
A: It's got a tank for Father, a hood for Mother, and a rattle for Baby!

Next.

Cum Cicero apud Damasippum cenaret—

Holy— What was this? He punched the translation button.

When/since/although [CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ALT.] *Cicero dined/was dining* [CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ALT.] *at the house of/among* [CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ALT.] *Damasippus, and that the former* [latter], *a wine mediocre having been set* [before them], *was saying: "Drink/visit this* [CONTEXT-SENSITIVE ALT.] *Falernum* [wine]. *This is a wine of forty years." Cicero has responded: "It carries its age well."* [DO YOU WANT TO TRANSLATE ANOTHER? Y OR N]

Another unfathomable one.

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Weather was the most dangerous. Six weeks in the slammer for a weather cliché.

Maybe if he'd read up on the vintage wines of Italy in the Classical Period. He did remember something about fermenting wine in lead-lined vats making Nero nutty as a fruitca— But not even Nero burning down Rome could choke a laugh out of this baby.

He was getting desperate. Without a decent joke, how could he even risk a hello to her?

Shakespeare! Everybody said the Immortal Bard was a laugh riot, and if Elmo could go all the way back to the Romans, he could certainly stop halfway for the Swan of Avon. Art had seen *Measure for Measure* once and claimed it was a riot. It was even on-line, so he could just sort of dive in and start soaking up the mirth.

Thou art good velvet; thou'rt a three-piled piece, I warrant thee. I had as leif be a list of an English kersey, as be piled as thou art piled, for a French velvet. Do I speak feelingly now?

Well, the guy might be a genius, but you couldn't prove by *Measure for Measure*. He wasn't even sure about Art anymore.

Look at her scanning the crowd for an empty carrel. The one paired with Elmo's was free, but he didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out she'd already seen it and was searching desperately for anything else.

So he'd concentrate on finding a joke and go find her later. Maybe the problem was trying to figure these things alone. In the old days he'd usually watched people's mouths for the first telltale tremble of a smile and then pretended to laugh heartily with them. He'd done fine, as long as he never volunteered a joke himself or risked a comment on the weather. Weather was the most dangerous. Six weeks in the slammer for a weather cliché. When people talked quality of life, they were *serious*.

And then one day he'd had a beer with lunch.

Nothing more dangerous than alcohol for someone with a congenital handicap like his. It unshackled every self-protective inhibition.

So he'd been sauntering along a path in Burnside Park under the streaked green bronze eyes of the bluff old general's statue, trying to

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walk off his buzz before he went back to his sports records, and he'd passed by some young office workers throwing a Frisbee back and forth.

He began ticking off to himself the longest sustained rally in a Frisbee game, greatest distance in a single throw, and a bunch of other really fascinating stats , when all at once the saucer veered toward him, and instinctively he caught it and skimmed it on to the next player. Before you could say "Jack Robinson," he was part of the group, laughing and cheering and reveling in this new camaraderie, and he turned impulsively to the next player, both of them sweating jubilantly, and cried out:

"Hot enough for you?"

The looks of shock. Of embarrassment. Of horror.

And out of nowhere, *fweep!* A park policewoman's whistle.

"Arr, I heard that!" she shouted in a thick Irish brogue. But there was nowhere to run from the long arm of good taste.

"It's just an expression," Elmo had wailed.

"Style is the dress of thoughts," the policewoman said. "Up against the wall." Her chubby partner came lumbering up.

"I recognize that one — Lord Chesterfield's letters!" Elmo cried as her chubby partner came lumbering up to them and clicked the metal cuffs around the miserable young man's wrists. "November 24, 1749 — I've memorized them all!"

"Tell it to the judge," puffed the partner, giving him a shove. "It's abusers like you that make our language so worn, so much abused, jaded and over-spurred, wind-broken, lame, the hackneyed roadster every bagman mounts."

"All these perpetrators are after being like gongs," the first cop said, giving Elmo a smart crack on the head.

Her partner burst into peals of laughter.

"I don't get it," Elmo wailed.

The two cops exchanged looks.

"Your kind never does, me boy. Book him, Frank."

And that was exactly what the judge had thrown at him.

Eep! She was coming toward him! She hadn't been able to find another empty carrel. So what if she walked his way with eyes down like a prisoner on her way to execution? She was going to be just *that far* away from him. She *was* that far away from him. Oh God, oh God, oh God.

He hid his face behind one hand, pretending to adjust his screen with the other.

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It carries its age well.

Was it funnier in Latin?

Bene aetatem fert.

Not really.

He widened the slit between his first and second fingers and peeked around the two screens separating them. Her face glowed in the orange of the readout, her beautiful forehead slightly wrinkled by whatever she was concentrating on, moving her lips as she read.

It was so . . . *cute* the way her mouth silently formed each word. So *adorable*. He didn't know anybody else did that. She happened to look up just then and caught him staring. Her eyes flicked back to her screen like he was Quasimodo.

What a jerk he'd been to let her see him staring. O.K., he hadn't done so well this far, but he wouldn't let this one go by without at least making a grab for the old ring. Time and tide— Opportunity knocks but—

He bit his lip so hard his eyes watered, and he stole another glance at her. If he did say something, what would it be? That was always the big problem.

Hot enough for—

Did he want another six weeks in the cooler?

How's it going! Nope. *How's life treating you!* No. *How they hanging!* Damn! *How's your onion!* That was safe. It also didn't mean anything.

Now wait just one minute. Was he or was he not a product of millions of generations of courtships and consummations? Man meets woman — the oldest one in the book— But couldn't he at least count on his genes to get him through, no matter how his brain screwed up? What was he, a man or a—

Argh! Pretty soon he'd need stitches. He leaned slowly toward her.

Buhflubbadafluth-uth-uth-wheeze.

He stuck out his foot to take his weight off the chair bladder.

Skritch.

The librarian glared at him through his tremendous contact lenses, walleyed as a goldfish in a bowl.

Say, had he made that up?

He straightened his back with new confidence.

And burped.

A huge, Herculean burp. A burp among burps. It echoed and reechoed

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up into the ancient vaulted ceiling like the sharp barks of a pack of dogs; it rumbled in the vast, uncharted depths of the subbasement; it circumnavigated the far walls of the room like Drake in search of continents for his queen.

It even made *her* stare.

Damn peanut butter and peppers. Damn his mother. How could he be so stupid and boring? Might as well be a book publisher or something.

She flushed and tried to escape back to her screen, but she was so rattled she accidentally knocked her shoulder bag off her carrel. It fell like a sticken legionnaire from a parapet *fumbledy-fump* down across his desk and *flumpf* to the floor.

"Sorry," he said.

"My fault entirely," she said with a frightened look, making a grab for it.

"Really, let me." He reached down just as fast.

Buhflubbadafluth-uth-uth-wheeze.

He jerked back to kill the noise, and his elbow hit his orange screen and flipped it over on its pivots like a Ferris wheel. *Crick* it hit hers, bounced back, *smek* hit him square on the head, and *zzzzitch-ch-ch* novaed and went blank just as he fell off his seat.

Ezeehw-uth-uth-uthfladabbulfhub.

She leapt to her feet with a muffled sob, and fled.

He watched her, stunned. If he could just explain. But to run that gauntlet of disapproving eyes. . . . Then he looked down and saw her shoulder bag at his feet. He who hesitates is—

But look before you lea—

Still, no time like the pres—

Better safe than sor—

Don't put off till tomor—

Argh, his lip! He could spend his whole life solitary and sullen as an owl (Where'd he gotten that one? Had he actually made something up?), or he could get up and go after her. He folded up his picoputer keyboard, *buhflubbadafluth-uth-uthed* out of his chair, snatched up her bag, and swiftly *skritch-skritch-skritched* toward the bright square of sliding door.

Shush it went for her as she fled before him; *shush* it closed; *shush* it opened for his pursuit.

"Through the X ray, young man!" shrieked the librarian. "I have to

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make sure there's nothing in your picoputer files! I have to look in your pocketboo—"

Shush it closed behind him, and he was blinking in the sunlight. There was something fresh and sharp about the city sounds, something zestful about the swelling wail of the library siren behind him as he plunged down the powerstairs into the burr of cars and trams, the scuffling shuffles of passersby, the bright shouts of children and adolescents from the playground across the street. Playing *Frisbee.* Eek! He began to tremble; sweat slicked his back and forehead.

There she was, just ahead, hurrying on.

"Hey! Hey, whoever you are! You forgot something!"

He knew it sounded like the oldest trick in the— But she *had* forgotten something, damn it. She looked back at him and seemed to hurry faster.

"Give me a break, will you?" he cried. "Where's the fire? Stop, I said. Whoa! Halt! Freeze!"

To his shock, she stopped in her tracks and put her hands up.

"Me?" she said looking straight ahead. "You want me for something?"

"Uh, no, I mean, it's just. . . ." Mutely, he held up the shoulder bag. "You left this."

She stole a glance over her shoulder. "Oh!" she said, and laughed a nervous, adorable little laugh. "Oh, *is that* all? Forgetful me."

"Me, too," he grinned. "I'd forget my head if it weren't screwed— I mean, that is, actually, I'm not forgetful at all. I got a memory like an ele—" He paused. "So, hot enough for — for this time of year?"

"I guess so," she said. "Outside."

"Good point. You want to put your arms down?"

"Look, it's not my fault," she said. Her eyes darted left and right as though she were going to bolt.

"Huh?" he said quickly. He'd have to crack a good one pretty soon, or she'd spot him for a bozo.

"Nothing," she said.

"So," he said. "How's things?"

"Fine," she smiled — such a beautiful smile. "Is your lip bleeding?"

"No. Well, yes. It's nothing, though. Just a flesh wound, I mean."

"It looks like you bit through it."

He covered his mouth with his hand.

"Or got punched by some . . . criminal," she said.

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"Um?" he said, puzzled. Ostentatiously, he peered down at the wristwatch below the hand covering his lip. "Will you look at that? How time flies when you're having — *burp*."

"Pardon?"

"Flies," he said. "Flies — why can't they see in winter?"

"Is this a test?"

"Because," he continued, smile frozen on his face and sweat pouring in rivulets down his neck and along his sides, "they leave their specs behind in summer."

There was a long pause. "What's a fly?"

That was it! That was what it was to have a sense of humor! She'd spotted right away there wasn't any such thing.

"They used to be a kind of household insect. Maybe you remember reading *The Encyclopedia Americana*, right side of the page halfway down, about how some African researchers on March 21, 1990 — I mean, they're extinct."

"I guess I remember somebody talking about them once. Somebody totally old."

"Mosquitoes, too."

"Excuse me?"

"Another insect," he said. "'Do what we can, summer will have its flies. If we walk in the woods, we must feed mosquitoes.' Emerson said that, but of course, not anymore."

"Really," she said uneasily.

"Nothing lasts forev— I mean, you know, every one of those mosquitoes is dead. Emerson, too. Um, say, of what did Job's wardrobe consist? Three wretched comforters."

"My family was never very religious."

He grinned like a run-over cat on the side of the road. He was bombing. He jammed his hand into his coat pocket.

Her eyes snapped shut. "All right," she said, voice quavering as she held out her hands palms down, "get it over with."

"Peanut butter," he beamed, extracting what was left of his sandwich and offering it to her.

She opened her eyes and looked fearfully at it. "Aren't those peppers? Don't you need something to drink with it?"

"Which reminds me, what's the difference between a glass of water and a glass of gin?"

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"I haven't any idea."

"*Ten cents.*"

"Please," she said, her eyes filling with tears, "don't play cat and mouse with me!"

"I didn't mean anything by it — it's just another old joke, is all," he said lamely. "I like to tell them every now and then to spice things up, mix a little old with the new for variety. *Very* occasionally, of course. Anyway, I think what it refers to is the fact that . . . I mean, what the humor used to come from . . . is that, uh, gin used to cost ten cents."

"Ah," she said. "That's very good. Very funny." She didn't laugh.

"And water was free back then."

"Hard to imagine."

"So the difference in cost, that is, would be ten cents. Because gin cost ten cents. Or so."

"For God's sake," she wailed, bursting into tears, "arrest me!"

"Arrest?"

"I admit it: I haven't gotten a single one of your jokes," she cried.

"They're that bad?"

"Throw me in jail." She sagged against the wall, sobbing pitifully.

"How?" His heart was full to bursting at her anguish, and he put his arms around her shoulders to comfort her. "I'm no cop."

"You can't fool me just 'cause you're on plainclothes detail. Why else would you be digging in the *Rattling Ford Jokes* book I had out last week?"

"You?"

"Stop pretending. The minute the librarian told me you'd called it down this morning, I knew the jig was u— never mind."

"What jig?"

"Sure, how could a guy like you ever understand, cracking all those terrific jokes a mile a minute?"

"Yeah? I mean, understand what?"

"You know how some people are born color-blind or tone-deaf. Me, I'm joke-blind and laugh-deaf. What else could I do except hunt for old jokes to pass off as my own? Except—"

"You couldn't tell which ones were funny?"

"I couldn't even remember them. I've got a terrible memory, remember?"

"I never forget anything."

"Well, I do. I can't even remember what your name is."

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"I never told you."

"See? And if you had, I wouldn't have remembered that, either, let alone what it actually was."

"Elmo, by the way."

"I'm Francie."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Well, I've got to go," she said, disengaging herself from his arms and retrieving her bag from his left wrist.

"No," he said. "Don't you see — we're perfect for each other. I could even help out in the memory department. Like — do you know why the Flivver is the perfect family car?"

Her face brightened. "It's got a tank for Father, a hood for Mother, and a toy for Baby!"

"Rattle."

"See? I bet if you don't remember exactly the right word, the joke's ruined."

"Rattle?" he said judiciously. "No, you just don't understand how humor works."

"Then what's the joke?"

"Well, you know, it's the idea that the mother, father, and kid all have something, when actually those old Model T's came with absolutely no extras. They even had oak bodies till 1910, you know."

She was very thoughtful for a long time. When she did pull away from the tear-soaked spot on his shirt and look up at him, it was with narrowed and suspicious eyes. "Even I can tell that's not it," she said. "If you're not a cop, Elroy, exactly why were you reading *Rattling Ford Jokes*?"

Elmo grinned sheepishly.

Her eyes widened. "*You, too!*"

"It takes all kinds."

"It's like a marriage made in heaven," she whispered, laying her head on his chest again.

"It's love makes the world —"

She held a finger to his lips as a police officer strolled by, twirling his chuckle club.

"Afternoon, Officer," she smiled.

The policeman waved cheerily and passed on, mercifully without quoting Lord Chesterfield.

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"Go round," Elmo continued. He kissed her softly on the lips. "Out of all the millions out there, how did we ever find each other?"

"It takes one to know one," she murmured. And they kissed again in a way that, no matter how many times it's been done before or since, will never be worn or threadbare.

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Rory Harper is a Texan who tells us he has recently had the good fortune to be able to go full-time as a freelance writer; he is currently in the process of selling his first novel. "Triage," his first story for F & SF, is a grisly tale of the medical profession, and deals with a ghoulish problem that besets one of its members.

Triage

By Rory Harper

THE NEIGHBOR CAT wasn't waiting for Martin at the end of his run. Every morning for the past five months, when Martin had put on the final burst of speed that deposited him puffing in his front yard, the beige and brown tom had placidly waited on the hood of his Audi. They talked and rubbed for a few minutes before going about their separate businesses.

Martin had come to take the morning ritual for granted. He looked around the yard, then stepped back to gaze down the sidewalk. No cat.

He rolled his neck on his shoulders to stay loose, then curled his toes, feeling them dig into the floors of his ragged tennies. Breath puffed smokily from his mouth in the chilly November air.

"Here, kitty, kitty." No cat.

He made the sound like hungry baby birds make. That always got a cat to respond. It worked this time, too. A soft, friendly, but somehow sly meow

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drifted from somewhere under the car. Martin made the baby bird sound again.

The cat sauntered out, tail brushing the front right wheel, and rubbed against his ankle. He bent to pet it, then recoiled.

The cat looked at him through ruined eyes, then batted his shoestring with a bloody paw. Its teeth poked irregularly through bruised lips in a horrid grin.

Reflexively, he shoved it away from him with his foot. It yowled in surprise, crushed rear legs oddly coordinating with ease to roll it upright after its initial stumble.

Martin winced to see his little friend in such bad shape. He got down on one knee and made the baby bird sound again, but it didn't trust him after being kicked.

As mangled as it looked, he couldn't understand why it wasn't screaming in agony. It seemed oddly calm and moved with a fluid grace that denied the ravages it presented to his eyes.

He waddled clumsily toward it. *Best to stay low to the ground. They run when you tower over them.* He lunged at it. It slipped between his fingers, but he got a firm grasp on its left hind leg. It twisted and clawed him, tearing free with a scream.

Overbalanced, Martin fell to his knees. He watched as the cat streaked down the driveway into the street.

A green sedan hit it in midleap. Martin caught a glimpse of a frightened teenage girl-face behind the wheel. The cat was thrown only a few dozen feet before it crunched into the oak growing between the sidewalk and the curb on the other side of the street.

Brakes screeched on asphalt, then the sedan accelerated again. Stunned, he watched it disappear around the corner.

He got to his feet clumsily and lumbered across the concrete and asphalt toward the shapeless bundle lying on the dewy, shadowed grass. Unthinking, he rubbed his hands together, smearing together driveway grit and the blood seeping from his cat scratches.

It couldn't have been alive after the abuse it had taken, but it was. Somehow placid, it lay quietly on its side, breathing evenly as he bent over it. Its hind legs spasmed when he stroked its head with two fingers. He was bemused to see that it looked exactly as it had before the car hit it. No new injuries deformed its fragile body; no extra blood soaked its matted fur.

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"Good kitty," Martin said. Then he looked around, as if a crowd were pressing close about them. "Give us a little air here, folks. He'll be all right. Stand back. I'm a doctor. I'll take care of him."

The cat licked his thumb, shivered, and died.

"Good kitty," Martin said again as he stroked it. "Aw, fuck. . . . Goooood kitty."

Teresa was still creating breakfast in the kitchen, so he got to the bathroom and cleaned up without her seeing him, which was just as well.

"You O.K., Doc?" she asked when she deposited his plate in front of him.

He did the best smile he could. "Huh? Yeah, fine. Just thinking."

"O.K. Still love me?"

"Uh-huh." He pretended to take a bite out of her forearm, deliberately slobbering on her in the process.

"Uck. . . . You're such an animal," she said, reassured.

He'd left the cat where it died. He didn't know whom to tell that their cat had gotten smashed, and he didn't have the time or the shovel to bury it; and besides, the garbagemen would drive down the street in an hour, and they'd see it and toss it into the back of their smelly, dirty truck, and it would be like the friendly neighbor cat had never existed.

Teresa got a phone call from one of her friends just as he finished dressing so he wandered in to see Mark until she finished talking and he could kiss her good-bye. She'd already moved Mark into his bed in the den. The fire had burned down to coals, and the lighting was low. He bent over and looked at his son. Mark was a year and a half old. As Martin's face came within his field of vision, he stirred dully and gurgled.

They'd been careful. Amniocentesis and sonograms and constant monitoring by one of his ob-gyn buddies at Park Plaza pediatric. She'd lost two in the first trimester, before Mark made it all the way. The fetuses had been grossly normal, so they figured she just miscarried easily. Something to be concerned about, but not *too* concerned.

Teresa delivered Mark normally, and it was a couple of days before they were sure he was profoundly retarded. Nothing on the outside looked damaged. He just didn't have all the right connections inside his downy skull. He was the kind of kid they called a "paperweight" when they were talking about the infants of people they didn't know. A slight heart ab-

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normality ensured that he wouldn't be a burden on society, or anyone else, for more than another ten years at the most. He'd certainly never qualify as a recipient for a heart transplant.

He groped toward Martin with stubby fingers. Martin drew back and rubbed the cat scratch on his right hand. He stared at the coals glowing in their bed of ashes on the hearth and thought about nothing. When Teresa came in, he forced himself to press his lips briefly against his son's clammy forehead before leaving the room with her.

On the way to the hospital, Martin got trapped in a line stacked up behind a short-cycling traffic light. When he glanced over at the car in the lane next to his, the man in the driver's seat grimaced and shrugged in sympathy for them both. A livid, unhealed scar ran from the man's temple to his chin. Blood dripped onto the shoulder of his suit. Martin stared at him. The man's smile faded, he shrugged again, and faced forward. The line moved forward, and the man's car turned right at the corner.

He pulled into the employee's parking lot behind the Emergency Room and snagged his white coat out of the backseat, the silver disk of the stethoscope dangling out of the big pocket on the right side. He tucked it back in and hurried through the empty hall to the elevator. With a little bit of luck, Dr. Graede would be late as usual for rounds, and his own tardiness wouldn't be noticed.

When the elevator came, he stepped in distractedly and punched the button for the fifth floor. A few floors up, he looked over at the gum-chewing orderly behind him and then down at the figure on the cart beside them.

The old woman was wrinkled and shrunken by death. *Probably killed by some wasting disease after a long fight, from the looks of her. Tuberculosis! Emphysema!* He knew he wasn't the hottest diagnostician at Park Plaza, but you gotta keep trying. Her chest cavity gaped open above the sheet. They'd tried open-heart massage at the end.

He reached forward and pulled the sheet up over her face.

"Are you new here?" he said reprovingly. "You should always have one of these covered completely before going out in public with it. Let's not nauseate the paying customers unnecessarily."

The orderly swallowed his gum convulsively.

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"What the hell is this?" screeched the corpse under the sheet. A clawed, knobby hand came from beneath the covering and yanked the sheet back down. "You're 'bout as funny as an enema, you little prick!"

Martin lurched away from her into the side of the cubicle, unable to draw a breath.

The doors clanked open, and he stumbled blindly out of the elevator.

"What's your name, you little prick? I'm gonna report you to the—" Closing elevator doors cut off her enraged howl.

She was dead! Jesus, somebody had cracked her wide open, like a goddamn walnut! He could still smell her, smell the sour odor that newly dead people had. *And she was insulted when I pointed it out!* He almost choked on the acid taste rising in his throat.

He staggered down the hall and collapsed into a pink vinyl chair next to the nurses' station.

He dropped his head toward his knees and tried to regain control of his breathing.

"Are you all right, Doctor?"

A pretty young Chicana nurse bent over him, looking concerned. "You are very pale," she said. "Can I help you?"

He swallowed, breathed through his mouth a few times. "I'm all right. I just saw—"

He stopped as a stain of dark venous blood sprouted flowerlike on her white skirt, centered over the juncture of her thighs.

"Your dress . . . ," he said.

"Yes, Doctor?" She smiled at him uncertainly.

Small wounds appeared on both sides of her slender neck and began to drip blood sluggishly.

I know what that is, he thought blankly. *On her neck. I saw it last month in the morgue. You can't forget what it looks like. It wakes you up in the middle of the night, the memory of it. Bite marks. Somebody is raping and killing her right now. They're biting her neck, like some of the more vicious ones do. Like the love bites I give Teresa. Only mine are different. Aren't they?*

She isn't noticing it — like the old woman didn't notice that she was dead!

The speaker over his head began to intone soothingly: "Dr. Heart to nursing station Five-C. Dr. Heart to nursing station Five-C, please."

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That was the code for a cardiac arrest, calling for the crash cart and a team to administer it.

"I need to answer that, Doctor," the nurse said. "I'm on Blue Team this month. Will you be all right?"

Martin nodded. "I'm fine now."

She hurried off to try and save another life. Blood dripped from the hem of her dress, leaving a shiny scarlet trail behind her.

He lay curled facing the wall on the bed in the room that was his in the hospital. While on E.R. rotation, an intern might work forty or fifty hours at a stretch. Weekends were especially bad. You grabbed a few minutes or hours of sleep whenever you could. Lots of interns, especially the unmarried ones, practically lived in the basement cubicles assigned to them.

I'm not stupid and I'm not crazy. But for some reason I'm hallucinating that people are dead or maimed when they're not.

He hadn't been able to avoid looking at them as he passed them on the way to his room. Most of them were just old. Some were bloated and gassy, or cut up, surgically and otherwise. Each one was obviously dead, or damn near to it. And he was the only one who seemed to notice it.

So maybe I'm seeing them, not as they are right now, but as they will be when they die. Or maybe I'm just skitzing out. But it sure doesn't have the symptoms of any psychosis I've ever read or heard about.

He heard the door open behind him, and turned fearfully on his bed.

"Are you all right, Doc?" At first he didn't recognize her.

Finally he said, "Oh God. It's you, Rae."

"What's the matter, Doc?" She came farther into the room and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm seeing dead people."

"What?"

Rae and he had attended most of their classes in tandem all the way through school at Baylor. They'd tried being lovers shortly after Mark was born. It hadn't worked out; no hard feelings, and they went right back to being friends.

He found himself babbling about his visions to her, not able to stop, talking faster and faster.

She shook him gently. "Hold on, Doc."

He stopped. "You don't believe me."

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She looked at him thoughtfully. "I believe you see these things," she said. "What do I look like?"

He forced a laugh. "You look dead as hell, just like everybody else."

"Dead how?"

"Old. Real old. You're going to last a long, long time. Be a great-grandma." He decided not to mention the neat hole in her throat. Somebody would tracheotomize her just before she died.

"Doc, we've had a bad run of deaths on the E.R. lately, and you've caught more than your share of them. That OD'd junkie last night. His girlfriend brought him in, and he somehow twisted around on his back and aspirated his own vomit. That was you that tried to suction his lungs dry, wasn't it?"

Martin nodded minutely.

"Thought so. And you got the old man who fell down the stairs and drove a rib splinter through his subclavian artery a couple days ago, too."

"Yeah."

"And your kid, being the way he is. . . ." She stopped.

She patted him on the hip. "We've both just been seeing it too much lately. It's enough to chew up anybody, Doc. This is our first E.R. rotation, and it's the first time either one of us has seen people dying right in front of us. And you don't handle death very well."

Martin frowned. "What's that crack supposed to mean?"

"Back in December, when Smiley died. You didn't come to the funeral."

"Meaningless barbaric ritual."

"No. Very meaningful barbaric ritual. It's how we admit that people we care about have left us. It's how we say good-bye to them. He was maybe your best friend in high school, and you avoided him like he had pneumonic plague after we moved him to ICU. I never heard you mention his name once after that. You didn't say a word about him to his sister when she dropped by last month."

"This is a bunch of bullshit, Rae! Dammit, I'm seeing dead people wandering around!"

She laid her hand on his shoulder again. "Yeah. It scares me, and I wish I knew how to fix it. But we both know you're not having a psychotic break. You're just a bit too lucid, too oriented to person, place, and time for that. My professional opinion is that you've got a fucked-up attitude about death for a doctor, Doc. We all hate death or we wouldn't be in the business, but

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"I don't much like watching dead people wandering around the place."

everybody gets sick and everybody dies sooner or later. You better learn to deal with that fact, unless you plan to specialize in dermatology."

He smiled faintly. "Thought you were gonna be a famous part mover. When'd you decide to go into psychiatry?"

"Screw psychiatry. Transplant specialists make five times as much."

"This stuff is really freaking me out, Rae. I don't much like watching dead people wandering around the place."

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, then hugged him. "Huh. I suppose not." She pulled a bottle out of her coat pocket and thumbed the childproof cap off. She spilled an assortment of capsules and tablets onto her palm. "Here. Why don't you take a five-milligram Valium? It's quiet now. Have a nap. If it hasn't gone away when you wake up, call me, and I'll line you up to talk with Belton over in Neuropsych. Have him run some tests or something, to rule out organic causes. Under the table, no records of it. It's the middle of the week, and the moon's only half full tonight, so we can get by without another rookie here."

"I'll take the nap." He curled her palm over the pills. "Pass on the dope." He held her hand a moment longer, then released it. "Thanks, Rae."

She stopped at the doorway. "It'll be O.K., Doc." She smiled worriedly. "You will call me if there's still a problem when you wake up?"

"Yeah. I think I'll be fine, though. Thanks."

He lay with his eyes open on the narrow bed for more than an hour, feeling grainy and tense. Sweat made his clothes l slick and heavy. He couldn't seem to find a comfortable position, but he felt too enervated to move about much.

Finally he got up enough courage to crawl off the bed. He peeked quickly both ways down the hall. Nobody in sight. He hurried the few yards to the door marked "Gentlemen."

The tiny bathroom was empty. Martin looked at himself in the mirror and groaned.

He was definitely dead. He forced himself to examine his image. Actually, it wasn't so bad. He wasn't the ancient wreck that Rae had become,

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but he was easily into his seventies. His face could never be mistaken for a living one, but it could have been worse. Still lots of hair, although it was pure white. No facial damage. He held up his arms. They were wrinkled and liver-spotted, but otherwise O.K. He unbuttoned his coat and shirt. No scars or holes marred his sunken chest.

In spite of himself, he was almost pleased at the way his corpse looked. *Actually, I'm a rather distinguished-looking old gent. The problem is, I'm still hallucinating.*

But he knew it wasn't a hallucination. He was seeing what he would look like in forty or fifty years.

He went back into the hallway and headed for the E.R. Calm descended over him like a silk scarf. *I can handle this. It's just dead bodies. No big deal for a doctor.*

As he approached the swinging doors of the ward, Dr. Graede came up behind him. Martin swung around when Graede tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why did you miss rounds today, Dr. Wagner?" Graede was one of those pompous assholes that people thought most middle-aged doctors became. He was also increasingly an alcoholic. That's why his morning rounds came after 8 A.M. He found it difficult to get up and functioning much earlier than that.

"I was feeling sick, Dr. Graede. I just got up." Graede didn't look too good dead. His eyes were a feral yellow, as was his papery skin. *Hepatic failure there for sure. Finally dissolved his liver with expensive booze. Hey, if I can get this under control, it might be a hell of a diagnostic tool.*

"Hmph. Well, if you're going to be sick, I suppose this is the place for it. In the future, I'd appreciate your notifying me when you plan to skip out."

"I certainly will, sir. I'm sorry, It won't happen again."

Graede turned and marched away. The back of his head was a crater. *He put a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, didn't he! Hell of a diagnostic tool, yes, indeed. I can handle this.*

Inside the swinging doors stood a man and his son. The boy looked to be about five years old.

"Doctor, we've been waiting here a long time. Andy fell down and hurt himself. He's not feeling too good, and nobody seems to be in a hurry to examine him."

"Well, I'll be glad to—" Martin looked at the arm that the boy cradled. The murdered child watched him cautiously. He didn't trust grown-ups

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much, and with good reason. His face was brutally smashed, and a railroad line of parallel cigarette burns marched from his wrist to his shoulder. Martin looked at the mildly guilty expression on the cadaver that stood beside little Andy.

Somebody is treating this child quite badly. I'll bet his daddy doesn't love him at all. Another expert diagnosis, Doctor! I cannot handle this.

He turned and fled from the hospital.

Martin didn't remember the next half hour very well.

Finally, exhausted, he simply sat on a park bench and watched the dead parade past him. Some obscure part of his mind whispered that he needed to look, that it was somehow good for him. It didn't feel good, though.

It went on and on. After a while, he noticed that they were all in more advanced stages of decay. Putrefying flesh dripped off their bodies as they staggered across the street when the traffic lights changed. Foul liquids slimed their bodies as they laughed and ate their sandwiches while sitting in front of the fountain a dozen feet away from his bench.

The stench was overpowering. He hauled himself from his bench and stumbled across the esplanade until he came to a row of heavy bushes planted along the side of an office building. He forced the branches aside and crawled forward until he could turn and sit with his back against the building.

An entire city died and began to rot around him. He curled into a ball, his face pressed into the crook of his elbow so that he breathed through his mouth into the cloth of his coat. It didn't keep the smell out. Eyes clenched shut, he envisioned the gases of corruption swirling and fermenting in the afternoon heat for miles on each side of him. Perhaps all the way around the earth.

They all died; they all died. They all died. Every one of them, sooner or later, in various horrid and gentle ways, they all died.

Just like he would. Just like Teresa would. Like everyone he ever knew or loved would.

Just like Mark would, sooner than most.

He curled even tighter into his fetal ball. He couldn't love Mark because Mark was terminally damaged. Let's not care about anybody that's going to die anyway.

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In the E.R. they called it triage. You didn't spend precious time and resources on the ones that were hopeless. You deliberately wrote them off and took your best shot with the ones who had a chance of making it.

He'd triaged Mark right out of his life.

So he left him untouched, almost unnoticed, dying in a crib next to the fireplace.

The fragrance of the dead became so powerful that he thought that it must surely poison him. Could you be surrounded by so much death and not die yourself? He'd seen himself in the mirror, and he looked old and worn to death, but perhaps that was a well-meant lie. Perhaps he could die now, become a citizen of the city of the dead with all the others.

Slowly, it diminished. By the time he noticed it and crawled back through the bushes to peek out, the smell had vanished completely.

The street was populated by mobile skeletons. Tags of ligament and muscle were still attached to the joints of most of them, but such extraneous material rapidly shriveled and dropped away, until each skeleton gleamed purely; each jocular skull cleanly reflected the afternoon sun.

Why are they so shiny? Somebody polished them bones up pretty good.

He crawled all the way out of the bushes and tried to stand. One of the skeletons stopped in front of him, started to go on, then hesitated.

"Are you all right, sir?" it said.

"Quite all right, thank you," Martin said. "But I appreciate your concern, sir." He managed to stand and look sincerely into empty eye sockets.

The grinning skull shook in puzzlement, then the skeleton clattered off about its business.

"I think I'll go home," Martin said as it retreated. "I've had a very bad day, but I'm not afraid anymore, you know." The skeleton quickened its pace.

The skeletons all began to lose their sheen, becoming rough and pitted. Slowly, they stopped moving and stood tinkling. Singly at first, then in waves, they began to collapse to the pavement, becoming random piles of bones.

"I'm not afraid, because everybody is going to die. All of us," Martin called out.

The bones crumbled, and white dust began to blow erratically from the piles.

"So it's all right to love my son, though he's going to die, because we all will, you know."

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The dust climbed in long spirals into the sky.

"So I'll just love him until he dies."

But he was speaking to nothing, as the last of the spirals tailed upward beyond the clouds.

He walked home through a silent, empty world.

It took him the rest of the afternoon, but he wasn't tired when he turned the corner to his house.

He strode up the sidewalk and into the house. He stopped whistling when the door to the kitchen swung open and Teresa stepped out.

"Martin!" she exclaimed. "What on earth happened to you? You've got dirt all over yourself."

Carefully, he removed his jacket and dropped it on the floor beside him. She moved close enough for him to grab her. He wrapped her in his arms and squeezed.

She hugged back. He buried his face in her hair and breathed deeply. A fine Teresa smell filled his nostrils.

"I missed you," he said. "I love you so much."

She laughed and extricated herself. "I bet you say that to all your wives."

"Uh-huh. All one of them."

"Are you all right? You look funny."

"I'm just fine." He looked closely at her. No signs of death anywhere on her face or body. "I had a rough day, but I'm all right now."

"If you say so. . . . Why don't you change into something clean while I finish dinner? Then you can tell me about your rough day."

"Yeah. O.K." The conversation felt so banal and normal and reassuring that he wanted to scream with joy.

He detoured to the living room before changing clothes. He hadn't noticed, but the afternoon must have cooled around him, for Teresa already had flames dancing in the fireplace.

He stepped across to the crib and looked down on Mark. His son stared back at him without emotion.

"I'm sorry," Martin whispered. "I'll love you very much from now on." He picked Mark up carefully.

Mark curled against his shoulder and hiccuped twice. His little arms came up, and chubby fingers reflexively grasped the material of his father's shirt.

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Martin stroked Mark's back and began to hum deep in his throat, much as a contented cat would purr.

He brought Mark off his shoulder that he might gaze at the face of his beloved child.

As he watched, the tiny body shriveled and blackened.

Mark's fine, feathery hair began to smoke, then translucent flames sheathed his whole body. His eyes melted and ran onto his cheeks simultaneously.

Martin gazed at him, then turned his head to glare at the fire. Mark hadn't aged and grown as Martin watched him die, so it must be fairly soon.

Maybe he'd learn to crawl on his own. How it happened didn't matter. He'd get into the fire, and it would consume him. It would be an agonizing, too-long dying, as the fire seared his little lungs and broiled his tender flesh.

A bad, ugly death for a baby who'd done nothing to deserve it. He couldn't allow that to happen to his son that he loved.

Martin couldn't keep from sobbing a few times as he saved Mark. Teresa appeared at the doorway as he was finishing, making sure. "I thought I heard Mark crying—"

Martin lifted the small pillow away from his son's face. Mark had struggled hardly at all. *Perhaps he welcomed my help,* Martin thought.

Carefully, he turned from the crib and nodded to her. "It's all right, dear. I thought it was bad, seeing all the dead people, but I was wrong. Because I could see, I saved him from the pain."

He smiled and stepped aside to show her. "It wasn't easy, but I could do it because I loved him."

Martin moved to stand in front of the fire. Behind him, Teresa moaned. He held his aged, trembling hands out to warn them above the flames.

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SALINITY

By Robert Frazier

Sweating in the full glare of August,
my father taught me a bittersweet truth
on a beach day, when he was restless
to be holding something
other than me —
a surf casting rod perhaps,
or the glow of health that eluded him and
corroded year by year like his station wagon
from halite poured on New England's icy roads.
He taught me that we preserved our heritage,
our only heritage really,
in the saltiness of our blood.
A striped bass can't live out of the sea,
he said, or in fresh water either.
Yet we carry our ocean with us from birth to beyond.
And as he cut short this speech,
fully knowing what carcinomas ate at him,
he let tears drop into the sea spraying on me.
Unmindfull, I sucked the salt from my wrist.
Now it haunts my veins
those molecules of his within me,
that ocean within the head of a pin.
There whole ecologies of salinity,
of the evolution of things
once left unsaid,
await evaporation and condensation
and distillation.
Worlds reduced within worlds.
Lives within lives.
Yesterdays.

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Elizabeth Moon's stories have appeared in Analog *and in Marion Zimmer Bradley's* Sword and Sorceress *anthologies. For her first appearance in* F & SF *she gives us a well-crafted and gently amusing tale about an offbeat close encounter in a Texas trailer park involving nudity, neighbors and the electric bill.*

If Nudity Offends You

By Elizabeth Moon

WHEN LOUANNE OPENED her light bill, she about had a fit. She hadn't had a bill that high since the time the Sims family hooked into her outlet for a week, when their daddy lost his job and right before they got kicked out of the trailer park for him being drunk and disorderly and the kids stealing stuff out of trash cans and their old speckled hound dog being loose and making a mess on Mrs. Thackridge's porch. Drunk and disorderly was pretty common, actually, and stealing from trash cans was a problem only because the Sims kids dumped everything before picking through it, and never bothered to put it back. The Sanchèz kids had the good sense to pick up what mess they made, and no one cared what they took out of the trash (though some of it was good, like a boom box that Carter Willis stole from down at Haley's, and hid in the trash can until Tuesday, only the Sanchez kids found it first). But when Grace (which is what they called that hound, and a stupid name that is for a coonhound, anyway) made that mess on Mrs. Thack-

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ridge's front porch, and she stepped in it on the way to a meeting of the Extension Homemaker's Club and had to go back inside and change her shoes, with her friends right there in the car waiting for her, that was *it* for the Sims family.

Anyhow, when Louanne saw that $82.67, she just threw it down on the table and said, "Oh my God," in that tone of voice her grandma never could stand, and then she said a bunch of other things like you'd expect, and then she tried to figure out whom she knew at the power company, because there was no way in the world she'd used that much electricity, and also no way in the world she could pay that bill. She didn't leave the air conditioner on all day like some people did, and she was careful to turn off lights in the kitchen when she moved to the bedroom, and all that. All those things to keep the bill low, because she'd just bought herself a car —almost new, a real good buy — and some fancy clothes to wear to the dance hall on weekends, now that she was through with Jack forever and looking for someone else. The car payment alone was $175 a month, and then there was the trailer park fee, and the mobile home payments, and the furniture rental . . . and the light bill was supposed to stay *low*, like under thirty dollars.

It occurred to Louanne that even though the Simses had left, someone else might have bled her for power. But who? She looked out each window of her trailer, looking for telltale cords. The Loomis family, to her right, seemed as stable and prosperous as any: Pete worked for the county, and Jane cooked in the school cafeteria. No cord there. The Blaylocks, on the left, were a very young couple from out of state. He worked construction; she had a small baby, and stayed home. Almost every day, Louanne had seen her sitting on the narrow step of their trailer, cuddling a plump, placid infant. Directly behind was an empty slot, and to either side behind. . . . Louanne could not tell if that ripple in the rough grass was a cord or not. She'd have to go outside to see for sure.

Now, if there's one sure way to make an enemy at a trailer park, it's to go snooping around like you thought your neighbors were cheating on you somehow, and before Louanne got into that kind of mess, she thought she'd try something safer. Back when Jack was living there, she wouldn't have minded a little trouble, being as he was six foot three and did rock work for Mullens Stone; but on her own, she'd had to learn quieter ways of doing things. Like checking up close to her own power outlets, to see if

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she could spot anything funny coming off the plugs.

She was still in the heels and city clothes she wore to work (secretary over at the courthouse: she made more money than either of her parents here in Behrnville), which was not exactly the right outfit for crawling around under things. She took off the purple polyester blouse, the black suit skirt (the jacket hung in her closet, awaiting winter), the dressy earrings and necklace, the lacy underwear that her mother, even *now*, even after all these years, thought unsuitable. And into the cutoffs, the striped tank top, and her thongs.

Outside, it was still blistering, and loud with the throbbing of her air conditioner, which she'd hung in the living room window. She opened the door of her storage shed that Jack had built her, a neat six-by-six space, and took down her water hose from its bracket. The outside hydrant wasn't but six feet from her power outlet, and with a new car — new for her, anyway — nobody'd wonder about her giving it a wash. Especially not on such a hot day.

She dragged the hose end around behind her trailer, and screwed it onto the faucet, letting her eye drift sideways toward the power outlet. Sure enough, besides her own attachment, another plump black cord ran down the pipe and off into the grass. But where? Louanne turned the water on as if a car wash were the only thing on her mind, and sprayed water on her tires. They did look grungy. She flipped the cutoff on the sprayer and went to get a brush out of her storage shed. About then, Curtis Blaylock drove in and grinned at her as he got out of his car.

"Little hot for that, ain't it?" he asked, eyeing her long, tanned legs.

"Well, you know . . . new car. . . ." Louanne didn't meet his eye, exactly, and went back around the end of the trailer without stopping to chat. Becoming a father didn't stop most men from looking at everyone else. She scrubbed at the tires, then sprayed the car itself, working around it so she could look everywhere without seeming to. That ripple in the grass, now . . . it seemed to go back at an angle, and then . . . lot 17. That was the one. A plain, old-fashioned metal trailer with rounded ends, not more than a twenty-seven- or thirty-footer. She thought she could see a black cord lifting up out of the grass and into its underside.

She finished the car, put her hose and brush back into the storage unit, and went back inside. Through the blinds in her bedroom, she could see a little more of lot 17. A middle-aged pickup with slightly faded blue paint

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sat beside the trailer. Lot 17's utility hookups were hidden from this angle. Louanne watched. A man came out . . . a big man, moving heavily. Sweat marks darkened his blue shirt; his face looked red and swollen. He climbed into the pickup, yelled something back at the trailer, then slammed the door and backed carefully into the lane between the rows. The trailer door opened briefly, and someone inside threw out a panful of water. Louanne wrinkled her nose in disgust. White trash. Typical. Anyone that'd steal power would throw water out in the yard like that instead of using the drain. It was probably stopped up anyway.

Louanne got herself a sandwich and a beer from her spotless refrigerator, and settled down on the bed to watch some more. A light came on as the evening darkened; against a flowered curtain, she could see a vague shape moving now and then. About nine or so the pickup returned. She heard its uneven engine diesel awhile before stopping. It was too dark to see the man walk to the door, but she did see the flash of light when the door opened.

Her light, she thought angrily. She'd paid for it. She wondered how long they left it on. Eighty-two dollars minus the maybe twenty-seven her bill should be, meant they were wasting over fifty dollars a month of her money. Probably kept the lights on half the night. Ran the air conditioner on high. Left the refrigerator door open, or made extra ice . . . stuff like that. She flounced off the bed and into the living room, getting herself another beer on the way. She didn't usually have two beers unless she was out with someone, but getting stung for someone else's electricity was bad enough to change her ways.

Thing was, she couldn't figure out how to handle it. She sure wasn't going over there in the dark, past nine at night, to confront that big, heavy man and whoever else was in there. That would be plain stupid. But on the other hand, there was that bill. . . . She couldn't afford to have her credit rating ruined, not as hard as she'd worked to get a decent one. She thought of just pulling the plug out, maybe at two in the morning or so, whenever their light went out, and cutting off the plug end. That would sort of let them know they'd been found, but it wasn't the same as starting a fight about it. On the other hand, that didn't get the bill paid.

Louanne put the can of beer down on a coaster — even if the tabletop *was* laminated, there was no sense in getting bad habits. Someday she'd own a real wood dining room table, and pretty end tables for her living

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room, and she didn't intend to have them marked up with rings from beer cans, either — and eased back into her darkened bedroom to look between the blinds. The light was still on behind the flowered curtain. It wasn't late enough yet. She went into her bathroom and used the john, then checked her face in the mirror. Her eyebrows needed plucking, and she really ought to do something about her hair. She fluffed it out one way, then another. The district judge's secretary had said she should streak it. Louanne tried to imagine how that might look. . . . Some people just looked older, grayer; but Holly Jordan, in the tax office, looked terrific with hers streaked. Louanne took out her tweezers and did her eyebrows, then tried her new plum-colored shadow. That might do for the dance hall on Friday.

But thinking of the dance hall on Friday (not Ladies Night, so it would cost her to get in) made her think of that electric bill, and she slammed her makeup drawer shut so hard the contents rattled. She was not going to put up with it; she'd do something right after work tomorrow. She'd make them pay. And she wouldn't cut the cord tonight, because if she did that, she'd have no proof. When they got up and didn't have lights, all they'd have to do would be pull the cord in, slowly, and no one could prove it had been there. On that resolve, she went to bed.

The blue pickup wasn't there, which she hoped meant the big man wasn't there, either. She had chosen her clothes carefully — not the city clothes she wore to work, in case things got rough, but not cutoffs and a tank, either. She wanted to look respectable, and tough, and like someone who had friends in the county sheriff's office. . . . And so, sweating under the late-afternoon sun, she made her way across the rough, sunburnt grass in a denim wraparound skirt, plaid short-sleeve blouse, and what she privately called her "little old lady" shoes, which she wore to visit family: crepe-soled and sort of loafer-looking. There was an oily patch where the pickup was usually parked. That figured. So also the lumps of old dried mud on the trailer steps, when it hadn't rained in weeks. Anyone who'd throw water outside like that, and steal power, wouldn't bother to clean off a step. Louanne squared her shoulders and put her foot on the bottom step.

That's when she saw the notice, printed in thick black letters on what looked like a three-by-five card. "If nudity offends You," it said, "Please do

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not ring this Bell." Right beside the grimy-looking doorbell button. Just right out there in public, talking about nudity. Louanne felt her neck getting even hotter than the afternoon sun should make it. Probably kept the kids away, and probably fooled the few door-to-door salesmen, but it wasn't going to fool her. Nobody went around without clothes in a trailer park, not and lived to tell about it. She put her thumb firmly on the button and pushed hard.

She heard it ring, a nasty buzz, and then footsteps coming toward the door. Despite herself, her palms were sweaty. Just remember, she told herself, that you don't *have* $82.67, and they owe it to you. Then the door opened.

It wasn't so much the nudity that offended her as the smell. It wasn't like she'd never smelled people before. . . . In fact, one of the things that made her so careful was remembering how it was at Aunt Ethel and Uncle Bert's, the summer she'd spent with them. She wasn't squeamish about it, exactly, but she did like things clean. But this was something else. A sort of heavy smell, which reminded her a little of the specialty gourmet shop in the mall near her sister Peggy's house in north Dallas — but reminded her a lot more of dirty old horse hooves. Bad. Not quite rotten, but not healthy, either; and the bare body of the woman staring at her through a tattered screen door had the same look as the smell that wafted out into the hot afternoon.

Louanne swallowed with determination and tried to fix her eyes on the woman's face . . . where she thought the face would be, anyway, hard as it was to see past the sunlit screen into the half-light where the woman stood. The woman was tall — would be taller than Louanne even if she stood on the ground — and up above her like that, a step higher, she looked really big, almost as big as the man. Louanne's eyes slid downward despite herself. She was big, with broad shoulders gleaming, slightly sweaty, and big — Louanne dragged her gaze upward again. She saw a quick gleam of teeth.

"Yes?" the woman said. Even in that word, Louanne knew she wasn't local. "Can I help you?" The rest of the phrase confirmed it — she sounded foreign almost, certainly not like anyone from around Behrnville.

"You're plugged into my outlet," said Louanne, gritting her teeth. She had written all this out, during her lunch hour, and rehearsed it several times. "You're stealing electricity from me, and you owe me sixty dollars,

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Now sunlight fell full on the woman, and Louanne struggled not to look.

because that's how much my bill went up." She stopped suddenly, arrested by the woman's quick movement. The screen door pushed outward, and Louanne stepped back, involuntarily, back to the gravel of the parking slot. Now sunlight fell full on the woman, and Louanne struggled not to look. The woman's face had creased in an expression of mingled confusion and concern that didn't fool Louanne for a minute.

"Please?" she said. She didn't even look to see if anyone outside the trailer was looking at her, which made Louanne even surer the whole thing was an act. "Stealing? What have you lost?"

A bad act, too. Louanne had seen kids in school do better. Contempt stiffened her courage. "Your cord," she said, pointing, "is plugged into my outlet. You are using *my* electricity, and I have to pay for it, and you owe me sixty dollars." She'd decided on that, because she was sure not to get what she asked for. . . . If she asked for sixty dollars, she might get thirty dollars, and she could just squeeze the rest if she didn't go out this weekend at all, and didn't buy any beer, or that red blouse she'd been looking at.

"You sell electricity?" the woman asked, still acting dumb and crazy. Louanne glared at her.

"You thought it was free? Come on, Lady . . . I can call a deputy and file a complaint—" Actually, she wouldn't ever do that, because she knew what would happen in the trailer park if she did, but maybe this lady who was too crazy or stupid to wear clothes or use a sink drain or take showers wouldn't know that. And in fact, the lady looked worried.

"I don't have any money," she said. "You'll have to wait until my husband comes home—"

Louanne had heard that excuse before, from both sides of a closed door. It was worth about the same as "the check's in the mail," but another billow of that disgusting smell convinced her she didn't want to stomp in and make a search for the cash she was sure she'd find hidden under one pillow or another.

"I want it tonight," she said loudly. "And don't go trying to sneak away." She expected some kind of whining argument, but the woman nodded quickly.

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"I tell him, as soon as he comes in. Where are you?" Louanne pointed to her own trailer, wondering if maybe the woman really was foreign, and maybe in that case she ought to warn her about standing there in broad daylight, in the open door of her trailer, without a stitch on her sleek, rounded, glistening body. But the screen was closing now, and just as Louanne regretted not having gotten her foot up onto the doorsill, the door clicked shut, and the woman flipped the hook over into the eye. "I tell him soon," the woman said again. "I'm sorry if we cause trouble. Very sorry." The inner door started to close.

"You'll be sorry if you don't pay up," said Louanne to the closing door. "Sixty dollars!" She turned away before it slammed in her face, and walked back to her own lot, sure she could feel the woman's eyes on her back. She wasn't too happy with the way it had gone, but, thinking about it, realized it could have been worse. Who knows what a crazy naked woman might have done, big as she was? Louanne decided to stay in her visiting clothes until the man came home, and, safely inside her own kitchen, she fixed herself a salad.

She had to admit she was kind of stunned by the whole thing. It had been awhile since she'd seen another woman naked like that, not since she'd gone to work for the county, anyway. She saw herself, of course, when she showered, and like that, but she didn't spend a lot of time on it. She'd rather look at Jack or whomever. When she looked at herself, she saw the kind of things they talked about in makeovers in the magazines: this too long, and that too short, and the other things too wide or narrow or the wrong color. It was more fun to have Jack or whoever look at her, because all the men ever seemed to see was what they liked. "Mmmm, cute," they say, touching here and there and tugging this and patting that, and it was, on the whole, more fun than looking at yourself in a mirror and wondering why God gave you hips wide enough for triplets and nothing to nurse them with. Not that that was *her* problem, Louanne reminded herself, but that's how her friend Casey had put it, the last time they skinny-dipped together in the river, on a dare, the last week of high school.

But that woman. She could nurse anything, up to an elephant, Louanne thought, and besides that. . . . She frowned, trying now to remember what she'd tired so hard not to see. She hadn't been particularly dark, but she hadn't been pale, either. A sort of brown-egg color, all over, with no light areas where even the most daring of Louanne's friends had light areas. . . .

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You could tan nude under a sunlamp or on certain beaches, but you couldn't go naked all the time. But this woman had had no markings at all, on a belly smooth as a beach ball. And — odd for someone who smelled so — she had shaved. Louanne shook her head, wondering. Her aunt Ethel had never shaved, and Louanne had come to hate the sight of her skinny legs, hairy and patched brown with age spots, sticking out from under her shabby old print dresses. But this woman . . . the gleaming smoothness of her skin, almost as if it had been oiled, all over, not a single flaw. . . . Louanne shivered without knowing why.

She stood and cleared the table, washing her single dish quickly. She started to get a beer out, and then changed her mind. If that man did come, she didn't want to smell of beer. She looked out her bedroom window. Nothing yet. The sun glared off the gravel of the parking space and the lane behind it. She was about to turn away, when she saw the blue pickup coming. It turned into the space beside the trailer, and the big man got out. Today he wore a tan shirt, with dark patches of sweat under the arms and on the back. Louanne wrinkled her nose, imagining the smell. He looked sunburnt, his neck and arms as red as his face, all glistening with sweat.

He went in. Louanne waited. Would the woman tell him at once, or wait, or not tell him at all? She didn't want to go back there, but she would, she told herself. He couldn't do anything to her in daylight, not if she stayed out of reach, and Jeannie Blaylock was home, if she screamed. She saw the flowered curtain twitched aside, and the man's face in the window, looking toward her trailer. She knew she'd been careful how she set the blinds, but she still had the feeling he knew she was watching. The curtains flipped shut. Then the door opened, and he came out, his round red face gleaming. He shot a quick glance toward her lot, then looked down before he went down his steps. He opened the pickup door, leaned in, came back out, shut the door. Then he started toward Louanne's trailer.

Her heart was hammering in her chest; she had to take two long breaths to quiet herself. He was actually coming, almost right away. She hurried out to the living room and sat poised on the rented tweed sofa. It seemed to take a long time, longer than she thought possible, even trying to count the steps in her mind. Finally a knock at her door. Louanne stood, trying to control her knees, and went to the door.

Even a step down, he was as tall as she, a man Jack might have

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hesitated to fight. But he was smiling at her, holding out a grubby envelope, "Sorry," he said. His voice was curiously light for such a big man. "We didn't mean to cause trouble. . . . The money is here. . . ." He held it out. Louanne made a long arm and took the envelope; he released it at once and stepped back. "The . . . the connection at our lot didn't work," he went on, looking slightly past her, as if he didn't want to see her. His voice, too, had a strange accent, something Louanne classified as foreign, though she couldn't have said if it was from the East Coast or somewhere farther away than that. "I have already taken our wire away," he said, glancing quickly at her face and away again. "It will not trouble you again. . . . We are sorry. . . . It was only that the connection did not work, and yours did."

The money in the envelope was twenties . . . more than three. Louanne looked at his gleaming red face and felt a quiver of sympathy. Maybe they hadn't known, if they were really foreigners. "You have to pay a deposit," she said. "To the power company, before they turn it on. That's why it didn't work."

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I didn't know. Is that enough? Are you satisfied?"

Greed and soothed outrage and bewilderment argued in her forehead. "It's all right," she found herself saying. "Don't worry." She wondered if she should give some of it back, but, after all, they had stolen from her, and it was only fair they should pay for it. Then her leftover conscience hit her, and she said, "It was only sixty, anyway, and if. . . ."

"For your trouble," he said quickly, backing away. "So sorry. . . . Don't worry. If you are not angry, if you are not reporting this to authorities. . . ."

"No,"said Louanne, still puzzled. Foreigners afraid of the law? Illegal immigrants? He didn't sound Mexican. Drug dealers?

"No more bother," he said. "Thank you. Thank you." And turned and walked quickly away, just as Curtis Blaylock drove in. Curtis looked at the man walking off, and at Louanne standing there with the envelope in her hand, for all the world like a whore with her pay, and grinned.

"Trouble?" he asked in a silky voice. Louanne had to stop that right where it was, or she would have more problems than a big light bill.

"Foreigners," she said, allowing an edge in her voice. "He wanted to know where to find" — she peered at the envelope as if to read the address, and found herself reading what was written on it — "3217 Fahrenheit, wher-

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ever that is. Not in this town, I told him, and he asked me to look it up on the county records. Somebody must've told him I work for the county."

"Pushy bastard," said Curtis. "Why's he think you should look things up for him?"

"I don't know," said Louanne, wondering why men like Curtis had a knack for asking questions you couldn't answer.

"Well, if you have any trouble, honey, just give us a call."

Louanne didn't answer that, and Curtis went on into his trailer, and she went back into hers. It was real money, all right, all twenties, and there were five of them. She could smell a fainter version of the smell in the trailer on lot 17, but money was money. A hundred bucks. It was too much, and made her worry again. Nobody in their right mind would've paid the sixty, let alone more. She made up her mind to send some of it back, somehow. Probably the woman would take it; women usually did. She readjusted the blinds in her bedroom, so that no one could possibly see in, and had a cooling shower. And finally went to bed, wondering only briefly how the foreigners were getting along in their lightless trailer.

She overslept, and had to run for it in the morning, dashing out of the door, slamming into her car, and riding the speed limit all the way to work. It wasn't until noon, when she paid the bill at the power company with the twenties, tossed the crumpled envelope in the wastebasket by the counter, and put the change in her billfold, that she thought of the foreigners again. Something nagged her about them, something she should have noticed in the morning's rush, but she didn't figure it out until she got home and saw lot 17 as bare as a swept floor.

They were gone. They had left in the night, without waking her or anyone, and now they were gone.

All through the subsequent excitement, Louanne kept her mouth shut about the hundred dollars and the stolen electricity, and made the kind of response everyone expected to rhetorical questions like, Who do you suppose? and Why do you think? and Whoever could have guessed? She figured she was thirty or forty dollars to the good, and didn't see why she should share any of it with old Mrs. Thackridge, who had plenty already or she wouldn't own the trailer park. They all knew she'd talked to the man (Curtis being glad to tell everyone, she noticed), but she stuck to her story about him wanting an address she'd never heard of, and wanting her

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to look it up in the county records. And she said she'd thrown the envelope away after not finding any such place, and not caring much, either, and after a while they all let her alone about as much as before, which pleased her just fine.

But she did wonder, from time to time, about that foreign lady wandering around the country without any clothes on. Brown as an egg all over, and not a hair on her body, and — it finally came to her one day, as she typed up a list of grand jury indictments when the judge's secretary was off sick — and *no navel* on the smooth, round, naked belly. She shook her head. Must have been there; everyone has a navel. Unless she had plastic surgery. But why?

After a while she didn't think of it much, except when she was wearing the red blouse . . . and after a while she was going with Alvin, who didn't like her in red, so she gave the blouse to the other secretary, and forgot the whole thing.

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 28: *In Which, With Wiles and Winces, We Waft Words Warranting, To Wit, Wonderful Wit*

IN THE words of Joseph L. Mankiewicz, placed by that superlative scenarist in the mouth of Bette Davis, in the 1950 film *All About Eve*, "Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night."

But first, as is my wont, anecdotes (one short, one medium long, both absolutely true) in aid of setting the tone and laying the groundwork. With assistance from the editors of THE RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, *Unabridged Edition*.

Anecdote the first.

A friend of mine, a woman who heads up "development" of projects in the area of television specials for one of the three major networks, called me from her office, oh, roughly, about a year ago, and she said, "Sit down. You're going to *love* this one. Are you sitting?" I told her I was, and she proceeded to tell me that thirty seconds earlier a man had left her office. This man — who, like my confidante, shall remain nameless for obvious reasons — is a major supplier of endless hundreds of hours of primetime product. He is a Big Name in the world of films and teevee; we're talking on a level with Chuck Fries or Aaron Spelling; a man whose assorted production companies have multi-million-dollar contracts with the networks. And he said to my friend, a woman empowered to say yes or no for the go-ahead or turndown of his big-ticket projects, "I've got the most sensational idea for a Special that you've ever heard! This is fantastic, it'll get you the numbers like nothing else you've ever done!" And my friend, blown back against her chair by the intensity and passion of this man's enthusi-

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asm, replied, "Well, *tell me!* What *is* this incredible concept for a Special that will blow America out of the water?"

And the man said: "Let's do *The Wiz*. . . .

". . . *white!*"

As she paused for my reaction that day, oh, roughly, about a year ago, so I now pause for *your* reaction.

Depending on whether your stomach aches from laughing as you now read this sentence, or you have a blank look on your face and the phrase *Why is that funny?* in your head, you will find yourself in one of two categories: those who need this essay desperately but won't perceive themselves as being the subject of the discussion . . . or those who already understand what I'm going to be getting at here, and know themselves not to be lacking. For those with the blank look, those in the first category, relate that anecdote to a friend you consider to possess a finely-tuned sense of humor, and check his/her response. Though like seeks like, you may have lucked-out and your friend can help you along with the rest of this confabulation. Not to mention the rest of your life.

(This has been, as stated, an absolutely *true* story. The man was dead serious. If this gives you pause as to the level of acuity demonstrated by those who cobble up what you watch on the tube, well, what took you so long to get The Word?)

Anecdote the second.

A number of years ago, while under the spell of Providence, Rhode Island, once the haunt of H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe, I began writing a short story titled "On the Slab" as an *hommage* to HPL. While only passingly echoic of the great fantasist's style, it was my admiring nod to the best of what he had written that had impressed me as a tyro.

One thing and another, I set the first few pages of the story aside after Providence, and was unable to return to the piece for several years. But when I did, I completed the yarn and sold it to *Omni*. "On the Slab" was a contemporary retelling of the Prometheus legend, told a bit more in the dark fantasy mode than is my usual approach with such efforts. I liked that story a lot.

And so it chanced that after the sale to *Omni*, but before it was published, I was engaged to deliver a lecture at New York University and, as is my wont, I read my latest (usually unpublished) story as part of the presentation. On that night in April of 1981, the story was "On the Slab."

When I finished the reading, I was rewarded with considerable ap-

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plause from the large audience, thanked them prettily, and asked if there were any questions.

Rising from the shoals of attendees was as young man whose somatotype and manner stirred instant recognition in me: *This is a stone science fiction fan,* I thought.

(Pause. The more contumelious among you, of whom I wrote at length last time, will no doubt snarl that I had no way of affirming such a snap judgment. That I was prejudging the largeish young man and saw him as stereotype. Maybe. But if you think those of us who deal with fans and readers constantly can't spot the fans in a crowd of ten thousand ordinary humans, I suggest you ask your nearest sf writer. It is an amalgam of clues informed by an understanding of body language, cultural taxonomy, deductive logic, the eye of the artist and the sad-but-true repetition of fan behavior as witnessed first-hand for more than three decades. Anyone who has ever read the Sherlock Holmes canon can do the same. And as we shall see in a moment, as the anecdote proceeds, whether an actual card-carrying, registered with N3F or FAPA fan, or merely one who is obsessed by the genre in the fannish manner, though unallied . . . this was a stone fan.)

So he stood, and I asked, "Do you have a question about the story?"

He said, "Have you ever heard of the Prometheus legend?"

The snickering in the audience kept me from answering for a moment. He looked around in confusion. My instant reaction was to be gentle. "Yes, I have," I replied.

"Well, your story is a rip-off of that, it seems to me." Now the audience was chuckling at him. And though I wasn't exactly toe-tappingly delighted at being accused of plagiarism by a total stranger, I tried to maintain a humane demeanor.

"You mean the way Alfred Bester's THE STARS MY DESTINATION was a ripoff of Dumas's THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO?" He just looked at me; hadn't the scarcest what I was talking about.

"But you made a lot of mistakes," he said, oblivious to the whispering of the audience throughout Eisner and Lubin Auditorium as those who knew what was happening explained to those who did not. He was determined to press on, and there wasn't a lot I could do to keep him from making a fool of himself. Had I tried to cut him off, I'd have been pilloried for savaging this naïf.

"Oh?" I said, as pockets of laughter around the hall gave him a warning he refused to hear.

"Yes, you made a lot of mistakes. You see, in the Prometheus legend it was his *liver* that was eaten out

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every day, not his heart, the way you wrote it. And it was an eagle that ate his liver every day, not a vulture like you wrote in your story."

"Carrion crow," I said.

"What?"

"I called it a vulture, and also a carrion crow."

"Yes. You got it all wrong. Why did you do that?"

The laughter was now ubiquitous. The largeish young man kept turning and looking. He was beginning to understand that whatever it was he'd said wrong, it was apparent to everyone else in the audience . . . but him. In anger, he turned back to me and demanded, "*So why did you do that?*"

At which point I'd had about enough, and I said, as flatly and George S. Pattonly as I could, "Because I damn well *felt* like it."

My tone made it quite clear to those ridiculing the young man, that the game was over. Now came the lesson. "Sir," I said, "everyone is laughing at you because it is obvious from the story that I am familiar with the Prometheus legend and have, in fact, written a pastiche on that myth, a retelling, an updating, a variant version, if you wish. When one writes a variant on a well-established legend, one reinterprets it to contemporize it, or to focus on aspects the original either saw one way or ignored entirely. I used the heart, rather than the liver, because in the days when the Prometheus legend was new, it was commonly thought that the liver was the residence of the soul . . . which is why the victors often ate the livers of those they'd vanquished, to absorb the fallen enemy's bravery and wisdom. Did you ever hear the expression, 'Bring me his liver and lights'? That meant his soul and his eyes. But today we think of the heart as the organ of choice. As for the crow, or vulture, rather than the eagle . . . well, I wanted a darker image. We think of the eagle as our national symbol, as a creature of honor and fortitude, soaring and pure. I wanted a bird that feasted on carrion. So I changed it. He isn't chained to a rock, either. These are what we call 'artistic license' and if used within the consistent framework of logic in a story, they are considered quite artful and legitimate."

I thought that would do it, and would get him off the hook. I thought anyone of even passing intelligence would understand and be content. I thought I was dealing with a rational human being. What I was dealing with, sadly, was a stone science fiction fan.

"Well, I still think you shouldn't have written it wrong," he said, and sat down heavily, to a tsunami of

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hisses and catcalls. Realizing I could do no better, I threw up my hands and went on with the evening's presentation.

Perhaps medium long was inaccurate, because all of the foregoing is merely backstory for the punchline of the anecdote.

I thought no more about that interchange, returned to Los Angeles, and was startled a week later when I received a *most* troubled phone call from the then-fiction editor of *Omni*. (I hasten to advise that the fiction editor at the time was, and remains, a superlative writer, as well as a friend of many years. It was not the current fiction editor, Ellen Datlow, who has been at her post with distinction for quite a few years. The editor of whom I speak knows I bear him illimitable affection, and we have laughed over this anecdote many times. It is not told to embarrass him, or to make him seem less worthy an editor than he proved himself. It just happens to be one of those dopey things we all do every once in a while, and I need it to make my point, so don't go looking for anything malicious, because it ain't there.)

Anyhow. He called, and he said, "Listen, we got a letter in the office the other day, from a guy who heard you read 'On the Slab' at NYU, and he's pointed out a lot of errors in the story, and we'd like you to rewrite them to take care of it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're putting me on!" I cried. "You mean to tell me that humorless dweeb *wrote you a letter*?!?!"

"Uh-huh."

"And you actually are taking it seriously, about a story that hasn't even been *published* yet, and you're asking me to honor the imbecile nitpicking of some yotz with a flat affect who may, for all I know, believe Bacon wrote Shakespeare's stuff, who may, for all I know, think Stephen Crane had no right to do a Civil War novel because he wasn't in the fight, who may, for all I know, interpret everything so literally that he wonders if the light goes out in the refrigerator when he closes the door? *Is that what you're telling me*?!"

My friend the editor fumfuh'd for a moment, and then said in a smaller voice, "Well, he said in the letter that it would embarrass us at *Omni* if readers thought we didn't know it was Prometheus's liver, and not his heart, that was eaten. . . ."

"Send back the story," I howled. "I'll return your fucking check! This is unconscionable! It's deranged! I'm going to kill you!"

Well, it worked out just fine. I calmed down after the fourth phone call — yes, we discussed this hot and cold and tepid for more than a

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week — because he refused to send back the story (demonstrating a lot more good sense than previously), and at one point I said something like, "Look, kiddo, myth and legend are plastic, they're fluid, they're malleable. They belong to whatever culture takes them up. And we, as Artists, are *required* to examine and retool not only myths and legends, but all variations of those myths, and all commentaries on those myths and legends and variations! It is our bloody *job*, fer crissakes!" And along about the fifth or sixth phone call he came on the line and said, with awe in his voice, "How did you manage to do that?"

"Do what?"

"Get that into the book."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You telling me you haven't seen William Irwin Thompson's book, THE TIME FALLING BODIES TAKE TO LIGHT? Mythology, sexuality, and the origins of culture? Everybody's reading it; it's knocking people on their asses; it's the cutting edge of new thinking about mythology."

I had not, at that moment, even *heard* about the Thompson book though now, six years later, I must have given away at least a dozen copies to other writers. And if you haven't found it yet, run don't crawl.

"So what's all this about me being in the book, or whatever?"

"No, you geek," he said, happy to turn it all back to me, "it's what you *said* that's in the book."

"And what wisdom is *that*, may I ask?"

I heard him riffling pages. "Listen to this: it's from the prologue." And this is what he read to me:

> The structural anthropologist urges us to ignore the orthodox who labor so patiently trying to eliminate the apocryphal variants from the one true text. The priests of the temple of Solomon worked to construct the canon of Biblical literature, and in this work the dubious folktales of the peasantry were dismissed, but for us a legend or *midrash* (a folktale variation on Biblical stories) may be a greater opening to the archetypal world than the overly refined redactions of the urban priestly intelligentsia.

(He stopped there, but the very next paragraph — page 11 of the St. Martin's Press hardcover edition — was even better:)

> Once we are freed from the quest for the one true version of a myth, we are also freed from the concern for determining the exact provenance of the variant. How can one tell where a myth comes from? A *midrash* from the Middle Ages may go back as an oral tradition into the darkness of time. Where do children's rhymes come from? What ancient motif is simply reclothed in a modern story or a children's skip-rope song? Can one really claim that the date of the singing is the date of the song? . . . Libraries have been burnt and whole religious movements wiped out because their beliefs and myths have

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> been considered to be of dubious origin by the upholders of orthodoxy; yet it is sometimes precisely the heretical myth that opens a doorway into the archetypal world . . . But there are other reasons why all the versions of a myth must be considered. . .

. . . and he goes on brilliantly for another two hundred and sixty pages — including feetnotes but excluding index — to codify the reasons for my not having to rewrite "On the Slab" to satisfy the witless pecksniffery of a stone science fiction fan. But had I not worked my magicks and caused William Irwin Thompson to write that book overnight so that St. Martin's Press could print it the next day and get it into the editor's paws by the following afternoon, I'd have had to return the check I'd long-since cashed and turned into groceries.

End of anecdote the second.

I approach the subject of this dissertation which is, in truth, a film review, as well as a discussion of one of the truly Forbidden Topics one does not broach with those who read magazines such as this one.

I won't keep you in suspense any longer. The thread that links my opening anecdotes is an obvious one: the prime mover in each is a person demonstrating boorishness posturing as wit. Narrowness of vision coupled with a literal-mindedness that is insensitive to a jocular interpretation. Both are so concretized in egocentrism that they have been walled off from recognition of the truth that insufficient knowledge has turned them into a parodic absurdity. They come to this unfortunate state, I further submit, because they are devoid of true wit. And that, I further submit, as the core of my argument, is a widespread condition among science fiction readers and fans.

(Before I go on, let me state for the record that this is not a *universal* flaw in sf readers and fans. I speak here not of *all*, but of *most*.) If you take instant umbrage at this essay, consider for a moment that those who do *not* credit this absence in their own makeup will not be bothered. They will chuckle and murmur, "How true, how true." But those who twitch may well perceive a node of familiarity, and will rush to accuse the messenger of garbling the communique; for them, the self-examination may founder on guilt (however mild) and the potential revelation of this Forbidden Topic will be obscured by subconscious self-serving. For every Sidney Coleman and Mike Glyer, every Lee Hoffman and Mike Glicksohn, there are a hundred Marley E. Bechtels and Jacopo Madaros, two hundred Gerald B. Storrows and George Sokols.

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The former group are well-known and unarguably funny men and a woman who also happen to be sf readers and fans; the latter group are sf readers who are, in my view, at one with the largeish young man from the NYU audience. It is not important for our purposes here that you know the former group, or what it is they have said and written over the years that marks them as witty. They are offered as palliatives for those who will forget that I carefully said *most*, not *all*.

But the latter group are paradigms I need to press my premise that *most* readers of science fiction, and *most* fans, are devoid of true wit. So here is the litany of unbreathing metal that passes for sensibility in these (otherwise probably wonderful) stone science fiction fans.

• In a clearly antic short story I wrote that appeared in *Asimov's* in December 1986, a fantasy titled "Laugh Track," the protagonist, a man given to first person recollections presented much in the manner of Damon Runyon, muses about his employment with a despicable tv producer named Bill Tidy. I wrote:

> Each of us has one dark eminence in his or her life who somehow has the hoodoo sign on us. Persons so cosmically loathesome that we continually spend our time when in their company silently asking ourselves *What the hell, what the bloody hell, what the ever-lasting Technicolor hell am I doing sitting here with this ambulatory piece of offal! This is the worst person who ever got born, and someone ought to wash out his life with a bar of Fels-Naptha.*
>
> But there you sit, and the next time you blink, there you sit again. It was probably the way Catherine the Great felt on her dates with Rasputin.
>
> Billy Tidy had that hold over me.

In the September 1987 issue of *Asimov's*, Marley E. Bechtel of Kenmore, NY had a letter published. The salient sections for our interest here are these:

> Dear Dr. Asimov:
>
> In the mid-December issue, there seem to be at least a couple of mistakes that should have been caught in the editing. First, in 'Neptune's Reach,' we are told . . . [And Bechtel goes on at some length to fault the story's author on what may well have been a valid technical point. Bechtel then gets to the second dire "mistake":]
>
> In Harlan Ellison's 'Laugh Track,' he comments that 'It was probably the way Catherine the Great felt on her dates with Rasputin.' How could they have dated, as she died in 1796 and he was not born until around 1871?

To which one should properly respond, in the original Prometheus legend the line read "It was probably the way Fay Wray felt on her dates with King Kong."

Literalmindedness, pecksniffery, sententiousness; the egocentrism of needing to demonstrate a humorless familiarity with data that con-

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travenes the purpose of an attempt at wit. The Mark of the cloven hoof of the stone sf fan.

• In a recent installment of this column, I eased into a seminal discussion of Woody Allen as a consummate director of fantasy — an obviousness that seemed to me to have escaped the notice of most critics — with a completely hoked-up bit of tomfoolery that had me and Allen in a bathyscaphe at the bottom of the Cayman Trench, eating hot fudge sundaes. As almost everyone was aware, Woody had received both the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Dramatic Presentation in 1974 for *Sleeper*, but in my thesis that sf *aficionados* had overlooked much more significant fantasywork by Allen, I employed the literary contrivances known as absurdity, engrossment, farce and sarcasm, which included Allen's inquiring if he had never been awarded a Hugo (clearly untrue) because he was Jewish. I then cited as refutation the fact that I, as a Jew, had been so honored, as well as Silverberg and Asimov and others, and included in the list of prominent Jews who owned Hugos the well-known Mormon, Orson Scott Card. If *those* lunacies had not tipped off any but the dullest intellects that this was a bit of vaudeville, surely having Woody Allen get the bends as we surfaced in our bathyscaphe should have.

Yet the editors of this magazine (and I personally) received about a dozen letters protesting the content of that essay, all of them reading that crazy stuff as *absolutely true!*

A Gerald B. Storrow wrote, in part: ". . . are we to gather that Ellison considers it a worthwhile use of your pages to seriously ask [sic] ourselves if there is truly anti-Semitism in Hollywood?" Apart from splitting the infinitive, Mr. Storrow went on at some length seriously accusing me of "name-dropping" because I used Woody Allen's name. (How he expected me to talk about Allen without using his name is a manifestation of paralogia that amazes even one as jaded in these matters as I.)

When I made the error of responding to Mr. Storrow's letter, I wrote: "I have long said that readers and fans of science fiction are as devoid of wit as cardboard; and sadly, sadly, my theory keeps reproving itself.

"A sense of humor isn't what counts. *Everyone* has some sort of rudimentary sense of humor. Hell, lizards, puppies and potato bugs have a sense of humor. It is *wit* that is in such short supply. And nowhere more tragically than among those who preen and strut with false pride that they are Slans, drenched in the ability to 'understand' science fiction."

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I then pointed out all the glaring tip-offs that the essay had been written in an antic manner, suggesting that he might not really be as perceptive as his insulting letter contended. And I concluded as follows: "Yet this condition of yours does trouble me. While I'm not licensed to pratice medicine, I would suggest a double-dose daily of James Thurber, Peter De Vries, Will Cuppy, Max Shulman, S.J. Perelman, Dave Barry and Daniel Manus Pinkwater. Stay away from fried foods and Henry James."

(Courtesy with the humorless, however, is a mugg's game, and it became obvious when this attempt to uncloud Mr. Storrow's mind produced further egregiously crabby letters, that the gentleman merely craved attention. This will be the last of *that*, you may be sure.)

● George Sokol of Montreal sent a letter alternately praising and vilifying me, to what end I'm not sure even after rereading the letter several times. But the gist of it (though he obviously understood the bathyscaphe/bends business was a put-on) was this: "Why . . . why would you want to include that ghastly bit about Mr. Allen getting the bends (oh, Godly ghosts, that awful desease [sic] dreaded by all bathyscaphers!)?

"The very purpose of the bathyscaphe was so that the need for gradual decompression could be eliminated, thus eliminating the risk of getting the bends. The bathyscaphe is a pressurized, navigable underwater ship, or vehicle! Please, I would think you would know that whenever a writer is being cute while writing, he should try and be as sincere and real as possible, and not just pile on the 'style' for style's sake."

Well, Mr. Sokol is certainly being sincere and real, and in his sincerity and realoidness he reaffirms the thesis of this discussion. And *he's* one of the *good* guys who seem to be enjoying the columns! So I hope he'll believe I'm sincere and real when I tell him that though I'm bewildered by the s&r of his letter, and consider him a nice fella for not being mean to me in his communique, I will raise this matter of liver versus bends, and eagle versus bathyscaphe on my next date with either Fay Wray or Catherine the Great, whoever comes first.

● And finally, we come to Jacopo M. Madaro of East Boston who took the following offhand drollery from my July column as matter for umbrage . . . I wrote:

> The potty is the last private place for a reader in the world. No one bothers you. Unless you live in a large Italian family, which is another sociological can of worms entirely.

Jacopo responded to my larking as follows: "It just happens that I

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am both Italian (a bona fide alien) and a sociologist. I am not aware of any sociological taxonomy based upon national or ethnic 'cans of worms.' Therefore, I have to conclude that your statement is well worth its excretory context. Cordially yours, worms notwithstanding, Jacopo M. Madaro."

You think *you* get weird mail!?!?

(Pause. I had not, in fact, planned for the preamble to my thesis and review to go on at this length. Honest. But once I got into it, the floodgates opened. And during the days through which I have been writing this, I have had occasion to read the preceding sections to a fairly large number of professionals in the sf field. Just to make sure that what I was saying here was not merely a product of my meanspirited nature. Was I bum-rapping fans without cause? Does anyone else feel as I do about this subject, that fans in the main are a humorless bunch who could drive you crazy if you try to write funny-stuff? So I called F----, and I called M---, and I called W-----, and I called A---- long distance, and a couple of others, and every one of them whooped and laughed and said, "True! How true! Oh, yeah, ain't that *true*!" And then they told me *their* proofs of the thesis, and then they egged me on to sic'm, to write it all, and then they made me promise I wouldn't use their names because if anyone was going to get killed for this, as much as they loved me, they'd rather it was I, not them. So okay, B & N & D & D, I won't use your names, you buncha pork scraps, you! And I make this pause, and tell you all this, because each of the above initials said I *had* to include my reply to Dr. Jacopo M. Madaro, which I hadn't intended to do because it was what *he* wrote that counts, not what I replied. But since they all made such a who-struck-john about it, I've decided to include the response here; but I feel I am trying your patience with these many side-channels to the main stream, and I want to spare those of you who grow weary. So. My letter of response to Dr. Madaro follows. It will be set in smaller type so you can identify where it starts and ends. If you wish to skip it, feel free. If not, read on.)

Dear Dr. Madaro:

Sorry it took me from May till now to respond to your charming note. I've been busy.

Apart from the usual umbrage taken by those who puff up their chests in letters because they think they are safe from actual, slap-in-the-face retribution for unsolicited rudeness, your rush to the defense of all Italians everywhere, since the dawn of time till the final tick of eternity (one presumes), is touching. Imbecile, but touching.

Nonetheless, I will reply to your snitty remarks as if they made sense. I do this in the spirit of kindness toward the afflicted; something like social work

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among the intellectually impacted.

I had not realized that merely by claiming ownership of the appellation "sociologist" one was accorded the right to issue *obiter dicta* on all human behavior. But as you not only manifest a need to make such pronouncements, but apparently are unfamiliar with a commonplace in large Italian families that *I* and a number of my Italian-American friends have experienced firsthand, let me poke a pinhole in the darkness and permit the light of new data to illuminate your store of taxonomical minutiae:

In large Italian families (and to very nearly the same degree in Jewish families of *any* size), unless they are extremely wealthy and have a plethora of bathrooms, members of the household bang on the door to the toilet and demand immediate access, at any hour of the day or night, even if you sneak in at 4am to read Thomas Hardy or *Playboy*.

There is a bewildering manifestation of some sort of specialized telepathy in this matter. Even if dead asleep or outside in the yard, members of large Italian families (and to lesser degree in Jewish families of *any* size) rise as if under the voodoo comand, and rush to the potty to bang on the door and demand immediate access. Silent as the grave, as one may keep, they *know* you are in there, and the banging commences.

This is a fact of life. Sorry you never caught up with it in your pursuit of the title "sociologist." Sometime maybe I'll explain to you why women put a roll of toilet paper on the roller one way, and men do it the other way. But enough education is enough. We mustn't strain, don't you agree?

And in conclusion: as a Jew who was raised in and around many Italian families, I assure you my offhand comment was made on the basis of experience in the field. It was not offered as a veiled slur against Italians. I know what a tough time you have keeping Italian names off the gangster characters in tv shows, and I don't want you to think I was trying to add to your burden. Yet I confess to a sinister subliminal resentment of Italians, based no doubt on my having discovered that Columbus was a Jew, and his discovery of America was likely his way of finding a place for his people safe from the Inquisition, and the resultant animus I harbor deep within myself at Italian Catholics copping the credit for yet another superlative act by the lowly Semite.

Is that what you were fishing for? Yours in unbridled bigotry, with the hope that the next time you try for "cultured prose" you scribble a note deserving of something better than a C-.

For those of you who seek the core of the argument, your reward is at hand.

There is far less humor written in the genre of sf than in almost any other category of fiction I can think of, with the possible exceptions of the western, the heavy-breathing bodice-rippers (unless you interpret them not at face-value but as hilarious put-ons from word one), and the Dostoevskian *angst-klatch*. I submit that's because those who write this stuff understand *a priori* that the audience is *muy* serioso, and the giggles won't go down smoothly. If one tries to name the writers of sf who have made a mark with humor, the list is not a long one. De Camp, Reynolds, Fred Brown, Geo. Alec Effinger, Harvey Jacobs, Bob Sheckley, sometimes Dick Lupoff, and perhaps a few more

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whose names escape me at the moment, with absolutely no intent to ignore those equally as proficient but simply absent from recall as I write this.

(I have to write apologia like that. You do send mail.)

And though you'll get no argument from me that humor is a specialized way of thinking and writing, nonetheless it is self-evident from existing evidence of sixty-one years of material published as scientifiction, sf, sci-fi, or science fiction, that this is not a canon overbrimming with yocks.

As I wrote earlier in this essay, possibly *years* earlier in this essay, a "sense of humor" is not the problem. It is the Gobi aridity of what *does* pass for a sense of humor among fans and readers. It is the absence of True Wit. And so we will understand, in the General Semantics sense, what is meant by "humor" and what is meant by "wit," which are no more the same thing than "morality" is the same as "ethics," I adjure you to pay heed to my lexicological chums from the unabridged RANDOM HOUSE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. (See box.)

Now if you have paid close attention to the section in the definition of *humor* noted as Syn. 3, you and I will both share an understanding of why "sense of humor" isn't the problem, but "true wit" is. Because most of what passes for humor in this genre is a sorry adumbration of that which we find howlingly funny in other literary forms.

In the vast archives of sf we find an inadequate portion of caricature and burlesque; absurdity and buffoonery (at least of the intentional sort); ridicule and farce; satire and high comedy; burlesque and black humor; overstatement and engrossment; travesty, sarcasm, slapstick and drollery. There *are* some ex-

hu·mor (hyōō′mər *or, often,* yōō′-), *n.* 1. a comic quality causing amusement: *the humor of a situation.* 2. the faculty of perceiving what is amusing or comical: *His humor buoyed him up through many depressing situations.* 3. the faculty of expressing the amusing or comical: *The author's humor came across better in the book than in the movie.* 4. comical writing or talk in general; comical books, skits, plays, *etc.* 5. humors, amusing or comical features: *humors of the occasion.* 6. mental disposition or temperament. 7. a temporary mood or frame of mind: *He's in a bad humor today.*

—Syn. 3. HUMOR, WIT are contrasting terms that agree in referring to an ability to perceive and express a sense of the clever or amusing. HUMOR consists principally in the recognition and expression of incongruities or peculiarities present in a situation or character. It is frequently used to illustrate some fundamental absurdity in human nature or conduct, and is generally thought of as more kindly than wit: *a genial and mellow type of humor; his biting wit.* WIT is a purely intellectual manifestation of cleverness and quickness of apprehension in discovering analogies between things really unlike, and expressing them in brief, diverting, and often sharp observations or remarks.

wit[1] (wit), *n.* 1. the keen perception and cleverly apt expression of those connections between ideas which awaken amusement and pleasure. 2. speech or writing showing such perception and expression. 3. a person having or noted for such perception and expression. 4. understanding, intelligence, or sagacity: *He doesn't have wit enough to come in out of the rain.* 5. Usually, wits. a. mental abilities, or powers of intelligent observation, keen perception, ingenious contrivance, etc.: *using one's wits to get ahead.* b. mental faculties; senses: *to lose one's wits.* 6. at one's wit's end. See end[1] (def. 28). 7. keep or have one's wits about one, to remain alert and observant; be prepared for or equal to anything: *It pays to keep your wits about you if you plan to drive at night.* 8. live by one's wits, to provide for oneself by employing ingenuity or cunning; live precariously: *He traveled around the world, living by his wits.* [ME, OE; c. G *Witz*, Icel *vit*; akin to WIT[2]]

—Syn. 1. drollery, facetiousness, waggishness, repartee. See humor. 4. wisdom, sense, mind.

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ceptions, of course. There are and have been writers who could not keep a straight face as they wrote some of this longwinded, far-flung, heroically self-important fustian . . . and they have palliated the pomposity of it all. But even those who have done it well, done it well enough so that we actually smiled once in a while as we read, and even more rarely laughed out loud at the printed page — laughing *with* the author's invention, rather than *at* it — have done it as five-finger exercise. No decent living can be made from humor in this field, not even by a Sheckley or a Goulart or a Harrison.

Try to recall the last full-length comic novel you read that could be counted as science fiction. Sheckley and Goulart come immediately to mind and then pffft! Spinrad, who reads a lot of this stuff, when I called him to jog my memory in case some prominent practitioner had slipped through the interstices, came up with the same list I'd already assembled, and stressed Effinger. So I called Effinger to see how well *he'd* done with humor, and he said "Are you kidding? They *hate* my funny stuff. They send me letters asking me why such-and-such is supposed to be funny. I write it to amuse *myself*. It's hard enough making a paycheck with the serious stuff, but why get myself creamed on purpose trying to make fans laugh? Most of them don't get the point, anyhow."

But fans *do* enjoy one form of humor. And that is the saddest part of it all.

The form of humor that fans dote on, that they slaver over, that they indulge in among themselves, that they slather across fanzine pages, that they interlineate and cross-quote, that they revere and unmercifully visit on the rest of us is . . .

The pun.

That most witless thalidomide bastard of True Wit. That intellectually-debased sediment found at the lowest level of humor. That coarse-surfaced imposition on our good offices that *never* produces a titter, a giggle, a chuckle or a laugh, but which takes as a measure of its effectiveness . . . a groan of pain. The pun is what sf fans and readers hoist banners in aid of.

But (as film historian and sf reader Bill Warren pointed out, when I called to read him the preceding pages) fans don't even do real *puns*. They change one letter of a word and think "sci-fri" is hilarious. Kindergarten word-play.

There are some things in this life that one definitely *does not* do.

You don't make jokes about air piracy as you go through the metal detector at O'Hare Airport. You

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don't drive down to East L.A. and scream ¡*Puto pendejo*! at a Chicano street gang. You don't eat unidentifiable mushrooms while on a forest stroll. You don't tug on Superman's cape, you don't spit into the wind, you don't pull the mask off that old Lone Ranger, and you don't mess around with Jim.

While in Paris, during a sober interview on French television, because I was pissed at Parisian rudeness, I vouchsafed the opinion that the one thing the French know nothing about is love. You can tell the French that their cooking sucks, that their army is comprised of cowards, or that their admiration for Jerry Lewis proves they have no taste, but you do *not* tell them they don't understand love. There remains an active warrant for my arrest in France.

Similarly, one does not tell fans they have no sense of humor. That fans are clever beyond belief is Accepted Wisdom with which one does not tamper. To write an essay of this length, pointing out what nearly *every* sf professional knows but will never say aloud, is tantamount to suicide.

But because that is so, in my view, it explains why sf fans and readers have championed one of the worst films in recent memory, *SPACEBALLS* (Brooksfilms/MGM) co-written, produced and directed by Mel Brooks.

See how it all ties together, however long it took me?

Spaceballs rivals *L'Avventura* as the single most obstinately boring film of all time. An invincibly tasteless farrago of lame jokes, obvious parodies, telegraphed punchlines, wretched acting and idiot plot so sad its funniest bit is a rip-off of Chuck Jones's "One Froggy Evening."

Mel Brooks. Since *The Producers* we have watched a Brobdingnagian wit shrink in on itself as if suffering from some hideous malaise, with only one period of remission — *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein* (1973-74) — until it has become dwarfish. And if "dwarfish," the sensibility that has given us *Spaceballs* goes by the name Dopey. And its confreres are certainly Sleazy, Farty, Mockie, Shallow, Sleepy and Tyro. Farty makes all the scatological and potty-training remarks; Tyro is in charge of the "home movies" look and sound of the film; Shallow selects the subjects to be satirized; Sleepy is in charge of keeping the boredom quotient high; Sleazy makes all the sophomoric sex comments and the sexist asides as if he had just discovered his wee-wee; and Mockie makes sure there is an abundance of self-hating Jewish references. But Dopey is the governing intelligence, selected by secret ballot on which

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None of the Above is the lone candidate.

An incredibly self-conscious movie. One grows weary of the *Moonlighting* shtick (totemized as "breaking the fourth wall between players and audience") in which characters turn and speak to the camera: "Nice dissolve." And when the head and arm of the Statue of Liberty come spiraling down out of space to the planet, only those who batten on puns can fail to perceive that they are about to see an *hommage* to *Planet of the Apes*, and only they laugh when the icons hit the sand and two people in monkey masks ride up. (When I saw this film in the company of a selected fan audience, and they did indeed react as described, it gave me a firm conviction that Brooks had reached precisely the audience he wanted: adolescents, and those who suffer from arrested adolescence.)

What sort of dribblebrain chooses to parody the *Star Wars* films (themselves parodies of the first of the trilogy and the totality a parody of the parodic form called "space opera") ten years too late? *Hardware Wars*, a twelve-minute stop-action short written, produced and directed by Ernie Fosselius in 1978 did it all funnier, faster, and with infinitely greater panache.

The writing is so much succotash that one has to have one's leash jerked to remember that this howling, blithering runamuck was actually directed by something approximating a human intelligence, not just slopped together in a tureen in some biochemistry lab, plugged into a Voss electrostatic generator and shot up with ten million volts of idiocy, at which point it leaped through a casement window and ran off shrieking into the countryside, with a deranged Mel Brooks tearing his hair, rending his flesh, ripping his raiment, and shouting, "It's *alive*! It's *alive*!"

Brooks's direction is an infirm, broken-backed, whimpering creature, shot through the brain and the heart, and left to thrash out its tormented death in the bush. Direction that does not even have the sense to be passively bad, but is Brooks's usual bombastic, farting, *geshry*ingly aggressive one-man Grand Guignol . . . written, directed and acted by Brooks with the same maturity and insight one encounters at lunchtime in a grade school, when one of your playmates turns his eyelids inside-out just as you're biting into your peanutbutter&jelly sandwich.

Brooks continues to be more interested in — perhaps obsessed with — his own obnoxious comic persona than anthing else, to the sacrifice of pacing, content, idea development or even honest humor above

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the level of the *tuchis* or bellybutton. He is a greedy talent, unwilling to give up a single ort from the groaning board of his films to other performers, sequential storytelling, or the ultimate primacy of loyalty to the work as a whole. It is a stark demonstration of disrespect for the audience, a loathing that says, "Open your mouth, I wanna pee in it again." He will cut the throat of logic, put out the eyes of artistic ambition, and disembowel integration of gag with story for the sake of one more booger or fart.

The moral of this film is: don't trust the coming attractions. (Your physician would refer to them technically as "trailers.") The trailers for *Spaceballs* were hilarious. Kids, don't try this at home.

And though *Spaceballs* made $28 million after 26 days, it is considered a critical and financial basket case. But it has been halloo'ed and praised by flotillas of sf fans and readers. (It is only interesting, I suppose, that Ebert — an ex-fanzine publisher and one-time fan — loved it while Siskel — with whom I seem to agree only when a two-headed calf is born — found it a dreary effort about as momentarily filling as a toxic waste burrito, my words not his.)

It is a film fans seem to love, following my thesis, because True Wit is wasted on them. They respond to the pun, to the trumpeting bleat of dumb humor . . . like the call of the wild as like seeks like.

There have been witty films. *The Princess Bride* is an exemplar. *Splash. Dr. Strangelove.* And outside the genre, a plethora, most evident at the moment being *In the Mood.*

But *Spaceballs* is a fan's movie.

It is one sustained pun groan from opening credits to fadeout. One throws up one's hands in sorrow and frustration, and wonders why we bother.

Why the liver and not the heart.

Why the carrion crow and not the eagle.

Why Catherine the Great never had a date with King Kong.

And why it should be that the literature we love should be dominated by readers and fans who are capable of laughing at this film . . . the same sort of people who laugh at paraplegics and old men falling downstairs.

The great French director Alain Resnais (and I've quoted this before) calls Brooks and his ilk, "The smart-aleck directors." Those who crave such inordinate portions of self-attention that they abandon all hope or desire for anything like Art or even a good story. And fandom clasps *Spaceballs* like its Kiss-A-Wookie T-shirt. Lepetomane lives! The pun rides triumphant!

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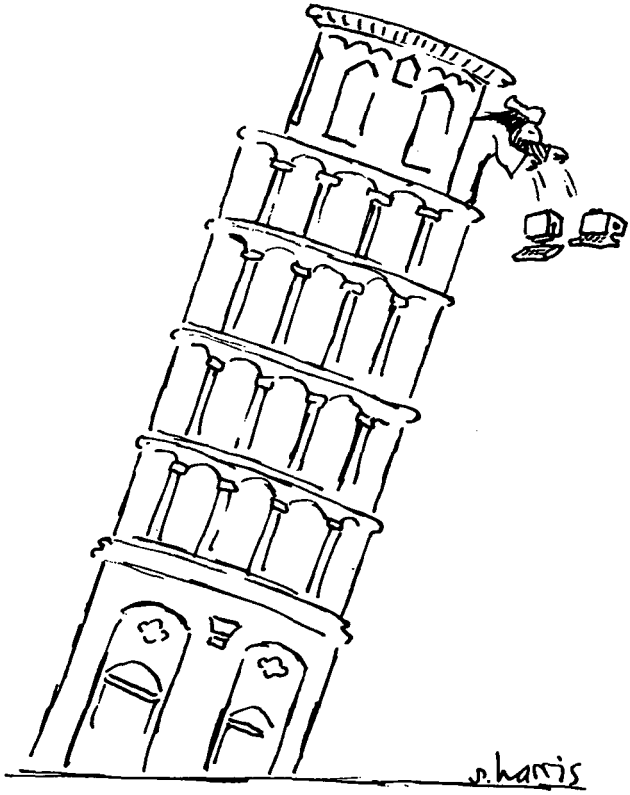
Now don't be angry because I revealed the Forbidden Truth. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you folks *are* as clever as you think you are. Maybe I'm not as clever as I think *I* am. Maybe pigs'll fly.

Just remember: who loves ya, baby?

The author wishes to thank Laurel, Betsey and Sue in the preparation of this column.



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The hero of this new Haldeman/Dann story is John Stranger, an American Indian in space. Stranger heads up a construction crew in an era of satellite warfare following the collapse of the Strategic Defense Initiative. (The story is a sequel to "High Steel," February 1982.)

SENTRY

By Jack Dann and Jack C. Haldeman II

6347 ACCESS CLASSIFICATION LEVEL THREE CONFIDENTIAL
6348 PASSWORD: REDMAN
6349
6350 UPDATE FILE: JOHN STRANGER
6351
6352 SOC 187735-NN-00 NATIVE AM.SIOUX-SW
6353 TRIBE LOCATION: D-5—SOUTH DAKOTA—116
6354 DRAFT DATE: 7 APR 2177
6355 STATUS: PERMANENT DRAFTEE (INVOLUNTARY)
6356 TIME REMAINING ON CONTRACT: INDEFINITE
6357 WORK LEVEL: BELLMAN, NEAR-EARTH ORBITAL CONSTRUCTION
6358
6359 STAN:
6360 THIS IS JUST FOR YOUR INFORMATION, BUT LEIGHTON
6361 HAS TAGGED THIS GUY FOR OBSERVATION. HE'S HEADING
6362 A TEAM OF FLOATERS THAT WILL BE IN YOUR QUAD, AND
6363 I THOUGHT YOU OUGHT TO KNOW THEY'RE GOING TO BE

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6364 WATCHING HIM CLOSELY. THAT MEANS THEY'RE GOING
6365 TO BE WATCHING YOU, TOO. DON'T FUCK THIS ONE UP. I'M
6366 NOT SURE WHY THE OLD MAN HAS TAKEN SUCH AN
6367 INTEREST IN HIM, BUT THEY'VE GOT HIM NAILED BUT
6368 GOOD. SOME SORT OF TROUBLE-MAKER, I GUESS. ALL HIS
6369 RECORDS ARE FLAGGED, SO BURN THIS FLIMSY AFTER YOU
6370 READ IT. HOPE TO SEE YOU THE NEXT TIME I GET OUT
6371 THAT WAY. THINGS ARE ABOUT THE SAME HERE, BUSY AS
6372 USUAL. SAME OLD STUFF. TAKE CARE, AND WATCH YOUR
6373 ASS ON THIS ONE.
6374 FRANK
6375
6376
6377 /*ROUTE PRINT REMOTE 65
6378 STOP
6379 END
6380
6381 3 JAN 2181 7:34 AM
6382 SOC 187725 NOFILE WIPE/DISK *** FLIMSY ONLY ***
/END

FILE NOTE:
THE ABOVE INTERCEPTED ON NET 53, 3 JAN 2181, 7:34:15 AM.
ACTION:
FRANK DREXLER TERMINATED WITH PREJUDICE
STAN HAWKINS TRANSFERRED ASTERIOD MINING COMPLEX 53-YT

JOHN STRANGER DRIFTED in the blazing, star-filled night as he watched his crew crawl over the surface of the satellite like a handful of ants on a silver, spiny barbell. They were almost finished, and it looked like they'd be about forty hours ahead of schedule. This one had been simple: replace a few

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solar cells and attend to a module that had deteriorated because of an acid leak. He wished they could all be so easy, but it never worked out that way. Each gravy-run was invariably followed by a ball-buster. It would probably be a furnace or the remoras next. Soon his easy-going crew would be raw with tension, including Sam Woquini, who bragged that any duty was just "sleeptime" for him.

"Hey, Bellman," called a voice through the static. It was Mike Elliot, John's immediate superior. Elliot had always disliked John. The feeling was mutual, but Elliot had the rank, and he used it to grind John whenever the occasion presented itself.

"Yeah, you got him," John said.

"Shift channel."

Damn, John thought, tonguing to confidential. It had to be trouble.

"I've got some new orders for you. Stranger," Elliot said. "You're on your way to sector Omega-ten."

"No fucking way," John said. "After what my crew went through last month, they have a right to some safe-duty. And I know goddamn well that Omega-ten's all watchdogs, most of them sentries. Cluster bombs, for Christ's sake. I'm not completely crazy. Send some other unit."

"You're available, and it's you they're sending," Elliot said. He always sounded condescending when he was enjoying himself. "The orders have already been cut."

"Put me on report if you want; I'm not doing it. I'll be fucked if I'm taking my people in there without a weapons team."

"The papers were signed by Director Leighton himself," Elliot said in a sickeningly smooth voice. He knew he had John by the balls; Leighton was the one man you couldn't buck. John could imagine Elliot's baby face, looking serious, as if he weren't really getting a charge out of this.

"When does this duty start?"

"Right now. Gather up your crew. We've assigned you some extra people. And you'll need a briefing with Murphy."

"If they're not weapons people, I don't want them. New people just get in the way."

"You work with whom I tell you to work, Stranger." Elliot broke the connection with a loud snap.

John opened a channel to Sam Woquini. "Did you get that?"

"I couldn't resist tapping in," Sam said. "I already got Anna, so don't

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worry. Look, we've slept our way through all the other missions and we're still here to tell the tale, so don't worry about it. I'm getting the sled now. Be there in a few minutes."

John watched his friend, who was a distant white speck blinking in and out of the darkness, move toward the sled. Everything out here was either deep black or blinding white, except the distant stars, which shone steadily. Some of the pinpoints of light appeared ruddy; others were blue-white or copper. The heavens were like massive fireworks caught in stop motion.

All around John, small satellites with huge fans of solar cells hung in orbit. In the distance were the L-3 and L-5 habitats surrounded by factories and labs, and the ever-present debris that seemed to gather around them.

John bit his lip as he watched Sam pick up the rest of the crew, remembering the manufacturing station they'd been working on last month. The thrusters had misfired, and the entire station had been torn to pieces. His people weren't rested enough to work the watchdogs, not yet. They needed more time. Omega-ten was a crowded and complicated sector, a real bitch.

Too many things could go wrong.

Ray Murphy was feeding numbers into the computer as John watched the greenish hologram flicker into life. It was a three-dimensional representation of the Omega-ten sector, with color-coded points of light identifying the various objects in orbit within the area. It was too crowded; there were too many points of light, too much debris. Red bands crisscrossed the sphere, indicating microwave transmission pathways to be avoided at all costs. There were too many red bands. There was too much of everything except empty space.

"This is what Omega-ten will look like when you enter," Ray said. "We're clearing vector seven five for your approach pattern." He tapped in a few more numbers, and a yellow beam appeared, running diagonally through the hologram.

"Give me real time," John asked without looking up.

Ray made some adjustments, and the points of light began to move. It was a complicated picture, orbits swinging in every direction. A watchdog's orbit constantly changed to lessen the chance of someone destroy-

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ing it. Debris and space-junk drifted through the sector, each piece watched as closely as the satellites, for in the wrong place they could be just as deadly. To the uninitiated, the hologram was mass confusion; to John Stranger, it was a delicately balanced system, a ballet of vectors in space; a balance felt rather than seen, in a way he could not describe.

But something was wrong, a pinpoint of light moving against the flow.

"There it is," John said. "That's the one."

Ray nodded. "Watchdog 26—BCC. Sentry-class watchdog. Cluster bomb. We're having trouble keeping control. In fact, we may be losing it entirely. There's a good chance it's already snatched."

John felt tired, nervous. He didn't like this at all. A sentry-class watchdog with cluster bombs was the worst of a bad lot. A snatched one was a nightmare. There was absolutely no telling what it might do.

The original watchdogs had been sent up as spy satellites to monitor ground activities and serve as early-warning systems. The move to armed sentry-class "peacekeeping" machines was swift and quiet in the years before the São Paulo blowup. That incident ended the optimistic, and long-lived, era of the Strategic Defense Initiative, which the Soviets had ironically dubbed "Star Peace." After São Paulo flared and several hundred thousand more people died in the strikes and counterstrikes, megacorporations followed the individual nations in the rush to put up their own satellites. They all had interests to protect. Now even the smallest corporations had the ability to wipe out entire nations or the ground bases of competitors.

It was referred to as balance of power.

Snatching was the gaining of control of someone else's satellite. It involved deciphering the codes that controlled the satellite and overriding the original programs with your own. Sentry-class watchdogs, because of the weapons they carried, were prime candidates for a snatch. Even though satellite technology was extremely sophisticated, watchdogs were snatched more often than anyone was willing to admit. It was often an inside job. People such as Ray were watched closely to protect them from being kidnapped and to keep them from selling out. Trust was a rare commodity among those who dealt with the doomsday machines.

"We may have lost it last week," Ray said. "I just don't know. It follows some commands, but not others. It may be a malfunction, or it may be something else."

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"Yes," John said, feeling cold and nervous. "It may be something else, all right. Give me a look inside the watchdog."

As he looked into the holo, at the images of circuitry and machinery, he felt that he was already in the Omega-ten sector, carefully dancing with death.

Leonard Broken-finger stood on the edge of a deep ravine in the center of the reservation. The ground was striated umber and rust; it was dry and lifeless, as dry as the still air that seemed to suck the very moisture out of him. His face was wrinkled and the color of pipestone; his body looked as desiccated as the land. But he was as strong as the distant rock towers that the ancients had thought were the whitened bones of a great, primeval monster. He was implacable as the stones underfoot.

He watched two young boys stalking a rabbit in the dusty, dry rush below him. They carried sticks with charred, pointed ends. Broken-finger knew them well, and he felt a profound sadness well up inside him. Soon they would be taken away by the corporations, drafted into service to work behind desks or in space. The corporation could extend a draftee's tour for nearly any reason at all. All because of a long-ago conscription treaty made with the government, a contract that could be bent, broken, and twisted in a thousand ways. But the corporation had all the power: they owned the land.

When the boys returned — if they ever returned at all — they would behave like strangers.

So very few had had the old talents, the medicine spirit, and they were all but gone now. Gray Fox and Afraid-of-Bears had died working in space for *wasicun* — white men. Their bodies were never even returned for proper burial. Broken-finger imagined that their souls floated in the sky like ghostly stars. They could have brought strength and resolution to their people, but they never had the chance.

Russell Inkanish had felt the spirit early; he was barely eight years old. Broken-finger had devoted himself to him, but it wasn't enough. The corporation drafted Russell when he was eighteen; he came back four years later, a narcodrine junkie who wandered the desert like the other spirits that could sometimes be seen flickering and ghosting through the deadlands on moonlit nights.

John Stranger had been the strongest. He had seen the spirits as light in

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the vision pit. He had screamed in the sweat-lodge when the heat blistered his back. He could have been a *wichasha wakan*, a medicine man. But he, too, had been taken too soon. There were times when Broken-finger could still feel John's presence. He had been gone a long time. Broken-finger had the strong intuition that the corporation was using John for a different purpose than any of the others; they were testing him, as he himself had done many times in the past. John had never failed Broken-finger. He had many things in front of him . . . if he could survive.

Broken-finger stood as still as stone. He stared at the sun, as if he were at sundance, but didn't burn with the terrible heat that poured down upon him. Tired of chasing the rabbit, the boys had returned to the village. Broken-finger noticed nothing, yet missed nothing.

He was thinking about John Stranger.

John was in the center of the circle, which was broken. Broken-finger could see the circle in the blinding whiteness of the sun. Images played in the white fire. He saw fire falling from the sky, killing hundreds; and John's hand was on the firebolts. How could that be?

And Broken-finger felt the coldness of living corpses beneath him, as if the very stuff he was standing on were made of human bone and sinew. As if the dead were below him. Yet they were not dead. They were not spirit.

He felt a vague brushing and thought of Anna Grass-like-Light. Something dangerous and strong and sad was working inside her. She was with John. There were others, too. He could feel their presence as pain. He could see them burning as he stared into the sun.

Many would soon die.

Broken-finger shivered and blinked. Now the sun was far to the west. He tried to move, and felt the familiar brush of cold wings. The vision that was given to him at his first vision-quest many years ago returned once more. He shook with the vision, seeing it once again, for it was as real as the ground upon which he stood. He cried in joy and terror as he faced its beauty and power. He saw the creature of myth and dreams, the greatest of thunder-beings, the being that can be seen but not comprehended. He saw his own dream of it, a dream that changed with his every thought and prayer.

Wakinyan-tanka eats his own young, for they make him many; yet he is one. He has a huge beak filled with jagged teeth, yet he has no head. He has wings, yet he has no shape.

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He prayed for John and the others.

He blinked again and it was dark. The day was gone, as if absorbed into John's burning eyes. The sky was filled with stars. Perhaps John and his people were one of those floating points of light. Broken-finger gazed east, toward the village. He wanted the company and comfort of his family, but instead he walked toward the flashing neon of the corporation-owned

JOHN STRANGER sat by himself in a videotect booth in the orbiting pleasure-dome, but he was not hooked-in. He didn't need to lose himself in the videos, which were simulated experiences, mostly sexual. He just wanted to be alone. He left the booth on transparency, but turned off the outside noise. All he could hear was faint thunder. Broken-finger used to say it was the thunder beings whispering to him. It was more likely the result of an old ear infection he had had when he was a child.

He looked through the transparency at the rows of iron bandits and telefac booths on the casino floor. There were also telefac games, where winners received a jolt of electric pleasure and losers had their nights spoiled with bone-crushing migraines; and there were traditional gaming tables, such as roulette, chuck-a-luck, craps, hazard, liar dice, vingt-et-un, and slide.

On this floor the crowd was mostly floaters, although corporate executives and their consorts drifted through, slumming. The more expensive and deadlier pleasures were upstairs, where the organ gambling and deformation games were being played. But they were closed to floaters. What the first level provided, though, was house whores — natural men and women; birdmen with implanted genitalia and feathers the color of rainbows; geisha; androgynes; drag queens and kings; children; machines promising clean, cold sex, although their exposed organs were fleshy; and all manner of genetically engineered mooncalves.

It was obvious that the providers didn't believe that a floater could think about anything above the groin. Perhaps they were right, John thought. He saw Shorthair take a drink from a robot that had the logo of the Trans-United Corporation emblazoned on its chest. Inside the sweep of the *T* and the *U*, someone had painted a poorly executed fist with an extended index finger. Shorthair had his arm around a naked woman

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whose skin was bleached zinc white. Thick artificial strands of glossy black hair curled around her head, moving like snakes, as if they had a life of their own. She looked pubescent.

John watched them disappear into the crowd. A fight started in the area of the iron bandits, and the MPs took their time before breaking it up.

The reservation seemed an eternity away. It was no wonder that so many of John's people became, in effect, white men. It was easy to do; they were far from anything that could be called home. They were white man's tools, living in a white man's universe. John could not blame those who became lost in the frogskin world. In fact, he felt as lost as they did.

Anna Grass-like-Light found John's booth and stood in front of it, staring in. Her eyes looked glazed and unfocused, and she was trembling. John had the sudden and disquieting thought that insects were moving beneath her skin, causing her subtle yet grotesque facial expressions. She had done too many narcodrines. Anna pounded on the transparent walls, and John came out of the booth and took her to table where they sat across from each other. She ordered a drink from a mobile vendor, then spilled part of it when she set her glass down onto the table.

"Having fun in there?" she asked, fumbling in her pocket for a narcodrine, a large bluish capsule. John stopped her before she could twist and break in under her nose.

"Leave it alone for a while," John said. "You're fucked-up enough already. You look like a walking overdose."

"Fuck you, medicine man. We're about to get our asses blown up in a sentry, and you're worried about some poppers? Maybe you don't need anything to cut through the shakes. You're so caught up in the old ways, you think you can just have a dream and we'll all be safe."

She popped the narcodrine. For an instant, Anna seemed to soften, and John remembered her as she used to be planetside. He'd known her since they were children. She had a sweetness about her that had all but disappeared after she was drafted.

"What the hell are you doing here, anyway?" she asked. "You told me you had to be alone to get ready for tomorrow. You lied to me."

"I just couldn't stay in the barrack any longer," John said defensively. She had caught him. If they were going to survive tomorrow, he would have to put his thoughts right, dream about it, work out every detail. But he couldn't seem to concentrate in his room, even though it was quiet.

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Perhaps it was too quiet, because he hadn't been able to visualize his mnemonic of the watchdog. In a way, Anna had been right about John having a dream and making everyone safe. He certainly owed it to them to try.

"Why not?" Anna asked.

"I don't know," John said.

"So you came here to slum it up."

"I thought it would help to be nearby," John said lamely, "in case there's any trouble."

"You're a fucking liar," Anna said. A tic was working like a bug that had been lodged in a vein of her neck. "You came here for the same reason that the rest of us did. You're scared out of your suit. So you thought that if you could see the rest of us behaving like assholes, you'd feel better. That would get your thoughts back into line real quick, wouldn't it?"

John couldn't answer. She knew him well and had touched a nerve. He couldn't stand to think of himself as a prig, but there it was.

"Do you want to fuck me, medicine man?" Anna asked softly, an edge of desperation and pleading in her voice, although her face seemed hard and angry as she looked at him.

It was an old challenge. Anna had played it before. But John had made a vow. He wasn't going to live his life on white man's terms, even if it meant staying celibate. He had to keep to the red path. He had to be the measure for the others.

"You're such a fucking hypocrite," Anna said. "I'll admit to being scared and lonely. But you, you've got a dead heart."

"Come on, I'll get you home."

"The fuck you will," Anna said, and she stood up, looked around, then called over a whore whose skin was covered with fur like a bear. She leaned against him as he helped her away from John.

John wanted to go after her, but he couldn't, for the mnemonic of the watchdog began to spin in his mind like a perfectly transparent geode. Everything around him became peripheral, and his sight, which was now clear and focused, turned inward.

In that instant, John Stranger hated himself for what he had become . . . for what they had all become.

The trail was not difficult to follow, even at night. Although the moon

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had not yet risen, the air was clear and the panoply of stars provided all the light Broken-finger needed. He took comfort in the distant howling of wild dogs and the night sounds of owls and insects and scurrying creatures. He paused for several minutes and stared at the fluted towers and rills of a small canyon, all seen as shadows of different intensity. The darkest shadows in the twisted canyon were hard and cold, and he knew them well. Once he had come over here to seek answers from his ancestors. He had stayed over a week without food or water, and although forty years had passed since then, he knew he could walk the canyon blindfolded and never miss a step. Time had become compressed for Broken-finger. He could remember what he had done years ago with the same clarity that he remembered yesterday's events.

As he crested the last ridge, he saw the commissary and started downhill. It blazed like some sort of aberration of the northern lights. The commissary was built of logs, in keeping with some of the old ways. It sat in an island of concrete surrounded by parked steam-cars and the small scoots favored by the young braves. Music drifted across the parking lot.

When Broken-finger walked through the door, he found the sounds of music and laughter and shouting deafening after the whispers of wind through stone in the desert night.

The large room was packed with young people from the reservation and visitors. Most were dancing or sitting at tables. Too many were drunk or stoned. Along the far wall was a row of videotect caskets, which were all in use. Broken-finger could see shadowy figures moving to preprogrammed hallucinations inside each casket; and it made him shudder to think they were bloods he had known since infancy. Incongruously placed between the row of caskets was a stone fireplace. The stones were real, but the fireplace was not. A holo of flames flickered in the hearth, and the sounds of wood crackling had almost fooled Broken-finger the first time he was in the commissary. The other walls were covered with softly lit, enticing pictures of food items and general supplies. He could smell the items and hear the olfactories sigh as he passed each picture. If one wanted flour or boots or jewelry, one had only to press the picture, insert an ID-credit card, and the stuff would be delivered, wrapped tightly in plastic, from some mysterious basement. Broken-finger had never used the machines, but he had watched many old men and women of his tribe stand in front of the wall as if they were at market. It's just another way to make us weak,

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he thought. Instead of growing corn, we push pictures. The machines were, in fact, about twenty years obsolete. But Broken-finger didn't know or care. He would rather walk twelve miles and buy from the one-armed man who had a blind wife — he knew many good stories.

A white man standing behind a long wooden counter looked up as Broken-finger approached him. He looked middle-aged and paunchy. Most of the whites working on the reservation were doing punishment duty. "What can I do for you, Chief?" he asked, wiping the counter with his hand, obviously a compulsive habit.

"I'm not a chief," he said evenly. "I wish to place a call to John Stranger. He is a bellman for Trans-United. My name is Leonard Broken-finger. My last name is two words separated by a dash. You'll need to know that when you write it in your machine."

"ID card."

Broken-finger handed him a gray card.

"I take it he's topside now," said the man.

"John Stranger is wherever Trans-United has sent him."

"Thanks for all your help," the man said sarcastically. He typed onto a keyboard behind the counter. "The satellite link is pretty good tonight, but it may take awhile."

Broken-finger just nodded and waited. A group of young people waved him over to their table. Then they made faces at him, told him stupid jokes, and finally, Stan Walking, who was a good boy, begged him to crack a smile. "Come on," Stan said. "Let me at least win the bet. You've got to put on a happy face sometime."

"What is it you hear from your sister?" he asked Stan.

"She's all right, I guess. T-U transferred her again. Somewhere in South America. In Paraguay. Asunción, or somewhere like that."

"That's the third time this year," Broken-finger said.

"She doesn't care," Stan said. "One office is the same as the other, I guess. She signed up for another five-year hitch. Said the money's pretty good."

Broken-finger nodded.

"Your call is ready," said the man behind the counter. "Take it in the back booth."

Broken-finger walked around the counter and stepped into the plastic booth, which immediately darkened. The door slid shut with a creaking

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You will have to make a decision and it will be painful. Death will be all around you . . .

noise behind him. Then, slowly, the image of John Stranger resolved about four feet away from him. Broken-finger had no sense of the cubicle he was in; it was as if he and John were in a large room.

"Broken-finger," John said. "It's been—"

"I bring you news of your father. He is not well." John's father had been dead for almost twenty years.

"Wait a minute," John said, and he leaned forward. For an instant he was out of view. Then there was a buzzing noise; and when John's image returned, it seemed to shimmer. "There," he said. "I've attached a scrambler. If anybody's listening in, they'll get only static."

Broken-finger didn't seem to notice. "Your father has a high fever, and his mind is not well. He has many dreams and speaks them to me. They make no sense, but I promised him I would tell them to you."

"My father?" John asked.

"He fears the fire from the sky," Broken-finger said. "It brings death to his descendants and his people, and somehow your hand is on the fire. He sees that this is not your doing, but that you have been forced into this thing. He trusts your judgment, though. It is a silly dream, of course, but I have promised him."

"I don't understand," John said.

"He sees more. He is worried for you and Grass-like-Light and Sam Woquini. Red Feather is cold on his heart. There is danger for your people. He sees a village of frozen faces."

"We're all going out tomorrow," John said. "A watchdog has somehow—"

"Your father knows nothing of watchdogs. He knows only the things I have told you. You will have to make a decision, and it will be painful. Death will be all around you like steam in the sweat-lodge. You must make your decision and not look back. You must not punish yourself for the thing you have done. This is what your father told me in the heat of his fever. They are ramblings of an old man. But I have given my word to tell these things to you."

"And you, Broken-finger. Are you O.K.?"

"I am simply an old man who carries a message from another to you.

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Your father sees one more thing in his fever. He sees you leading your people."

"I do that every day. It's my job as bellman."

"Yes, John Stranger, that is your job. I must go now. Your father is not well."

"My father—"

"Take care, John Stranger." And then Broken-finger pressed the disconnect button that glowed on a faint console behind him. The image of John Stranger disappeared as the lights in the booth came on and the door creaked open.

Director Leighton's office occupied the entire top shell of O'Neil Seven. The expansive curved ceiling was over ten meters high, a conspicuous waste of space that served to intimidate those who had to do business with him in person. The ceiling and walls were opaqued, or polarized, to an unrelieved, dull metallic gray.

Leighton reviewed the tape. He had seen it five times, and each time he imagined he had found something new. He played it once again, this time without sound. Broken-finger's image appeared to float beside John Stranger's in the center of Leighton's executive office. Leighton sat behind an ancient oak desk with its antique fittings and appurtenances, which even included a leather-clad green blotter and a gold pen-and-pencil set. He used the pen and pencil; it was one of his few eccentricities.

The old man knew something, but what? Leighton asked himself. Broken-finger had been vague, and the bullshit about John's father hadn't fooled the spotters for a moment. They knew John's history well. That's what he paid them for.

He wondered about a leak. Could the old man have picked up on something? If so, what, and how much? Leighton watched Broken-finger's jaw move up and down on the screen. Just an old man? Maybe. Dangerous? Maybe. He stopped the tape.

In the darkness he pressed a button on the inside well of the desk with his knee.

"Who's on staff at the commissary down there?" he asked.

"Harry Stanton's the front, sir. The red team's underground."

"Send Stanton to Spain. Shift the red team to Utah and bring in a skeleton team. I don't want to take any chances. Has the science staff been moved?"

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"Yessir. And I've made provisions to move the entire—"

"Just follow the emergency directive you've been given. Moving the science staff will be sufficient, thank you. I don't want it to look like a goddamn exodus."

"Anything else, Director?"

"Yes, who the fuck gave Stranger a scrambler?"

"An engineer named Taylor Westlake. It didn't work, of course."

"Eliminate him. Make it an accident. And the old man, Broken-finger. . . ."

"You want the same number for him?"

Leighton gazed through the transparent walls at several Trans-United ships floating near a geodesic manufacturing station. Above the geodesic and behind the junk of a jerry-rigged freebooter colony, the mirrored solar collectors hung like the wings of some fantastic rectangular bird. Leighton looked downward, relaxing as he did when he was making a decision. He had the entire room on transparency. It was as if he and his desk were weightless, suspended in space. Below him was Earth; its hazed horizon looked as if it were made of rainbows, as if it were the edge of a fragile soap bubble.

"No, I guess not," he said. "Not yet. He may be useful."

John got a break, a small one, to be sure, but a break nonetheless. Of the three new people Elliot had assigned to him, one of them happened to be Shawn Rhodes. She was a weapons expert and had worked with watchdogs and flashers. Her experience would at least offset the other new floaters, who would only be in the way no matter how good they were. It was always difficult working with new people. Over the years his crew had grown very close. They had been through the barrel together. It didn't hurt that they were all of Indian extraction, mostly full-bloods, even though they came from different tribes and had different perceptions about the old ways.

As they approached sector Omega-ten, John sat suited-up in the cargo area of the transport and talked with Shawn. The cargo area was surrounded by walls of huge boxes. Each gray metal rectangle was numbered. Shorthair said he felt like he was in a post office lobby. Sam Woquini thought they looked more like caskets.

The members of his crew either tied themselves down to the hold-

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tights as John did or drifted from wall to wall. They were all listening to what Shawn had to say. She spoke quietly. Her voice sounded surprisingly low for such a small woman: she was barely five foot. She was fine-featured: red hair; freckles; and a thin, firm mouth; but her eyes were as hard and penetrating as a duty soldier's.

"This sector has twelve watchdogs, ten of which we own. Basically, this is a Trans-United sector, as much as any sector can belong to anybody. One of the other watchdogs belongs to Macro Tech, and the other belongs to the Swiss."

Someone guffawed. Switzerland had been completely overrun after the last firewar. Their underground bases and shelters caved in like mines during the first detonation. The country had been looted as badly as Johannesburg. The Swiss had never regained any power. The banking industry was already settled in the Bahamas, where it was provided with safe haven by unanimous decree of the World Court of Governments and other Polities. Even Continental Cooperative had more satellites than the Swiss, and they were almost entirely a land operation.

"Besides the watchdogs, there are six flashers, two furnaces, and ninety-two remoras, of which we control seventy-three. Like I said, this is a Trans-United area. Something to be thankful for."

John took little comfort in that. Remoras were killers, no matter whom they belonged to. They were programmed to protect and destroy. The small satellites hovered around the watchdogs, blasting anything that got too close. In theory, they wouldn't bother his crew as long as they stayed in the cleared sector. Ray had programmed the defensive satellites to recognize John's crew as "friend." It wasn't much, but it was something: most space weaponry nowadays was hardwired to accept only limited external programming. The owners of the other remoras and watchdogs had been informed that John's crew was on a routine, *peaceful* maintenance mission. Supposedly, they had already programmed their satellites accordingly. Supposedly. There was always the possibility that something could go wrong, either accidentally or intentionally, and it was an even chance that someone had snatched the watchdog. Firewars had started over less. Mexico City had been cluster-bombed over a poaching claim ten years ago. In a hundred years or so, it might cool off enough to rebuild. Compared to the watchdogs and remoras, the furnaces were safe. They were just processing plants. The flashers — microwave relay stations — were

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a problem only if you walked into one of their invisible beams. Yet both furnaces and flashers were potential weapons. Tectonics had lost a crew to an accidental blowoff of a furnace that no one believed was an accident. If someone who knew the command sequence reprogrammed the flasher to turn a quarter of a degree, it could fry a crew or blast a city. Both of these things had happened in the past.

"There's no way we can tell exactly what's wrong until we actually go inside," Shawn continued. "It's probably just a malfunction in the guidance system, which is why they've grabbed you for the job, John. On the other hand, if it's a snatch, you'll be needing my help."

"If it's a snatch, we'll need more than help," Shorthair said as he defaced one of the numbered wall caskets with a beam marker. He was drawing little yellow flowers on the metal. He always drew those flowers on every fitting beam and column he bolted together. He never changed the design. "Divine guidance wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Thanks for the encouragement, Shorthair," John said. "I'm always open to constructive suggestions."

The voice of the transport's pilot crackled: "Five minutes to Omega-ten, Mr. Stranger."

"Be right up," John said.

John and Shawn floated up the narrow passageway to the control room as the rest of the crew made a last check of their gear. From the bubble in the control room, Omega-ten looked, at first glance, to be total blackness broken only by Earth below them. But John's trained eyes immediately picked up half a dozen remoras — small, hardly visible points of reflected light that were like the eyes of predators in some especially dark jungle night. The remoras were where they were supposed to be. Good. Now if they would only stay there.

The ship moved slowly through Omega-ten, following the path Ray Murphy had worked out. As they passed a Swiss watchdog, even John smiled. It was hardly bigger than a council lodge, and the wings of its solar panels needed repair. John could sympathize with the Swiss; his own people had faced hard times for hundreds of years. He hoped the Swiss would pull through.

When the Macro Tech furnace passed in and out of view, John knew they were almost at their destination. The watchdog had already appeared on the pilot's monitor, but John stared out the bubble to see it with his

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eyes. At first he could see only scattered specks of light, but then the watchdog came into view. It was a huge sphere. Dull metal. But there was something else there, too. Something deadly.

"Get me Ray on the line," John told the pilot, glancing at Shawn. She had seen it, too.

"Murphy here, Stranger."

"What the hell's happening?" John snapped. "There are too fucking many remoras hanging around this watchdog. They can't all be ours."

"They're not," said Ray. "Macro just sent three in there, and they've got two more on the way. I don't know why. Nobody tells me anything."

"I'm scrubbing this mission," John said. "Suicide isn't in my nature."

"Can't," Ray said. "Something big's going on with the brass. I tried to pull the plug for you, but Leighton himself told me to keep you out there. Elliot's hanging right over my shoulder to make sure I keep you in line. He's here now."

"Well, fuck Elliot, and fuck Leighton, too. Macro could blast my crew anytime it wanted to. I'm not going to sacrifice my people just to keep Trans-United happy."

Shawn gave him a sideways glance. No one stood up to Leighton that way.

"Stranger, you turn back now, and I'll have you and your whole goddamn crew breathing vacuum," Elliot said. "If Leighton wants it, it's big. And he's going to get it. You'd have to take the controls away from your pilot, because he's not going to help you. Isn't that right, Fred?"

The pilot nodded nervously; he didn't look over at John.

"Something else Director Leighton wanted you to know before you kicked out," Elliot continued. "This is a perimeter-defense watchdog."

"I know that," John said.

"Well, what you don't know is that if Macro snatched it, the chances are that your home reservation might have been turned into a prime target area."

John felt a chill fan down his back. "Why? There's nothing worth blowing up. It's just fucking desert, is all."

"Politics. Maybe Macro just doesn't like Indians. I don't know anything except what Leighton told me to tell you."

John's sharp-featured face was a mask hiding the rekindled hatred he felt for everyone and everything around him, for the very stupidity and

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venality that had taken all of them this far from Earth. Yet threaded through the raw hatred was a profound sadness, not only for his crew and the people on his tiny reservation, but for the *wasicun*, too. They were all caught . . . trapped. He had often had feelings like this in the sweat-lodge. The same mixture of hatred and sadness . . . and that was also a kind of love. Hatred wasn't enough to vanquish an enemy.

"I'll get my crew," John said to the pilot. "Take us in."

THEY HOVERED about fifty meters from the watchdog on a flat, open utility shed launched from the transporter. Remoras the size of a man surrounded them, but kept their distance. The massive watchdog loomed ahead. Small portals pockmarked its sides: lasers, a last line of defense in case the remoras failed. The cluster-bomb assembly itself was larger than a house and held not only the multiple warheads, but thousands of scatter-dummies — decoys to fool anyone who tried to intercept the bomb. Directional antennae sprouted all over the watchdog's surface. They would have to be manually aligned after he finished his part of the job. It was a long and tedious process, but others would do that.

His job was simple. Go inside the death machine and fix it.

The plan was to replace the control board for the guidance system and check all the patch lines. If it was a simple malfunction, they should be able to track it down from there. If it had been snatched, however, the whole system would probably be booby-trapped. He'd either get around that or he wouldn't. It was that simple.

Shawn would go in with him.

"Sam, I want you to stay at the sled's controls," John said. "If anything happens, get the crew back to the transport immediately."

"Yes, Mr. Bellman," he said, chuckling, his voice sarcastic. He was joking, making fun of the near-legendary stupidity of most bellmen. After a pause, he said, "This job won't be nothin'; you'll see. Sleeptime."

"Well, *you'd* better sleep with your eyes open," John said.

"I always do." The humor had disappeared from Sam's voice, replaced by calmness. Very little bothered him.

"Are you ready?" Shawn asked. John nodded. She drifted off the sled, and, with a small burst of nitrogen from his thruster-pack, he followed. He half expected a laser to slice through him at any second.

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The watchdog looked much larger up close, and even more deadly. Its antennae twitched and turned, tracking them, along with everything else that moved in this sector. It was like a faceless Medusa floating above Earth.

John and Shawn floated like divers in an ebon ocean to the only entrance into the satellite, a heavy port ringed with lasers and hold-tights. Passing into the dark side of the watchdog, John felt a brush of fear sweep past him like the shadow of a vulture. He clipped his tether to a hold-tight and tried to ignore the laser staring him in the face.

Shawn surprised John by drawing her hand back and forth across her throat; it was a universal signal in space. She wanted him to turn off his intercom so they could speak in private. He nodded and flicked the switch with his tongue. She pressed up against him. From the transport, it would look as if they were working on the complicated entrance lock. She touched her helmet to his.

"There's something you should know," she said. Her voice, carrying through the metal and plastic of her helmet, was tinny and distant. "Elliot and Leighton are bullshitting you. This is a 'worst possible case' sentry. There must be something down there on Earth that Trans-United wants to hide. If the shit ever hits the fan, this is the sentry that's supposed to take care of the evidence. And if I know about it, you can bet your ass that Macro knows it, too.

"Thanks," John said. He understood, but that didn't make it any easier. What it meant was that if Trans-United lost a violent corporate takeover, they would burn their bridges behind them, leaving worthless land and hiding their secrets forever. His homeland was, for reasons he did not understand, one of the bridges to be burned. Literally.

And then he remembered that Leonard Broken-finger had said something about a village of frozen faces. Could that have something to do with all of this?

'We'd better move," John said.

When they switched their intercoms back on, Elliot was yelling. "Why were communications cut?"

"Can it, Elliot," John said. "We had a short, got it fixed. We can either get this job done or sit here and listen to you bitch. Which is it?"

He grumbled, then shut up.

"There, I've got it, John," Shawn said, swinging the entry port open.

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Feetfirst, she pulled herself into the small opening. John followed. They both turned on their chest and helmet lamps, which cast an intense, almost pure white light.

There was more room inside than John had expected, but he could almost feel the mass of cluster-bombs around him. The interior of the sentry was starkly functional, full of machinery and complicated, multicolored circuitry. They were surrounded by a metal gridwork that kept them from bumping into anything they shouldn't. The grid was hinged in various places to provide access to the equipment behind it.

Shawn bent over the master control board and studied it intently. John floated behind her, watching over her shoulder.

"As nearly as I can tell, these seals are intact," she said. "They could be phonies, but I don't think so. If this egg's been snatched, it doesn't look like it was done from here. Still, could be a program snatch. . . ."

John didn't need to be told that. He felt wired, as if he were seeing everything with tunnel vision. Broken-finger had once told him when he was a child that it was the gift of danger. John turned and swung open a section of the gridwork. The attitude thruster control system seemed like a logical place to start looking for the problem. He unhooked the probe from his work belt and scrolled down to the proper section of the trouble-shooting pad on his left wrist. Then, while Shawn worked on the board, he examined the coiled, wiry guts of the thruster controls. It wasn't hard work, but it was tedious. There were nearly fifty checkpoints to be reached in this section alone. He had to be painstakingly accurate, and there was no guarantee that the problem was in the thrusters. Carefully, he pushed a knot of wires to one side as he pressed his probe past them to the next checkpoint. The readout was good to six decimal places. He pulled out the probe, arranged the wires as they had been, and moved on.

Then Shawn changed position. After a moment she said, "Sonova-*bitch!*" There was a sharp intake of breath in John's intercom. He turned and saw her sprawled against the gridwork on the other side of the room. He could see a tiny hole in her suit below her chest light. Her faceplate was frosted over.

John pushed himself off the wall toward her and slapped a quickseal over the hole. But she twisted as he applied the seal, and John saw her back. It was too late. Between her shoulder blades was a jagged hole, an exit wound, that was larger than his fist. Her suit was shredded, and the

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wound was a mass of flesh and shattered bone. A pink mist was pouring out of it. Dead, damn it. Booby-trapped.

Then Anna screamed.

He pushed himself toward the exit.

"Remoras!" shouted Red Feather.

John reached the port just as the first remora hit the sled. There was a soundless explosion, a blossom of flame that shattered the sled, spilling debris and his friends in all directions. Another scream: Red Feather gone.

Red Feather is cold on his heart. There is danger for your people.

Ray's voice came in loud, overriding everyone else's. It was ragged with panic. "Stranger, it's a snatch. The damn thing's been triggered. Code Blue."

John froze, and the spectacle of death hung before his eyes. His crew was scattered, injured; some were dying or dead. And more would die when the sentry activated. In a few short minutes his homeland would become a hole in the desert.

He pushed himself back inside the sentry.

He fears the fire from the sky. It brings death to his descendants and his people, and somehow your hand is on the fire.

Code Blue. A forty-five-second countdown. It was out of Ray's hands.

John propelled himself to the master control board, gently elbowing Shawn's corpse out of the way. He focused himself, gathered his strength, replaced his panic with a drifting calmness. He thought of the thunderbeings, the eagles without form, and he heard the thunder. He took comfort in the familiar sound as he surveyed the board in front of him. Although he had worked on a mock-up of a similar board, it had been over a year ago. He tried to remember.

And it came back to him.

First he looked for a fail-safe, but couldn't find one on this board. Damn, there was no way he could stop the countdown now.

You have to make a decision, and it will be painful. Death will be all around you like steam in the sweat-lodge.

Shawn had placed a meter and recoder over the patchpoints and had slipjacked them into the circuitry. Its tiny screen blinked and glowed red, indicating that the original hardwired program had been snatched. The patchpoints told him something. Besides the primary target there were five backups. But it didn't tell him where they were. For an instant he floated there, imagining the innocent lives below. He pressed two op-

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posing keys on the meter. It beeped when it found a patchpoint coordinate, which appeared in the readout. He had found the newly programmed secondary target. It wasn't the reservation. He could just delete the entire program snatch, but what if Shawn had been right and the reservation was one of the hardwired Trans-United targets? Then he *would* be the instrument of destruction.

He found the third backup target. That wasn't it, either.

Then he found the primary target. It was the reservation, and it was part of the jerry-rigged overlay. Leighton had been right. His homeland would be dust in a few minutes.

There was no time to waste. He deleted the snatched program and prayed that the recorder would shunt the bombs to the original hardwired targets. But what if Shawn had been right, after all? The reservation might still be one of the hardwired targets.

It was too late.

The sentry rocked violently as the cluster-bombs were launched. They were committed now; a fire storm worse than Dresden was headed toward Earth.

Then everything exploded in a burst of blinding white light.

The remoras, guided by unknown hands, were closing in on the sentry and blasting it.

John cartwheeled through space. The sentry split into several large chunks surrounded by thousands of smaller pieces of debris. Everything tumbled away from the explosion.

Earth and Sun spun vertiginously around him, as if in a dream of falling. The remoras were going crazy. Like a feeding frenzy among sharks, they were shooting at everything that moved. John heard the thunder loud in his ears and felt something cold brush past him — the thunder-beings.

His crew was going to die unless he did something.

Using short bursts from the small spot-welder he carried strapped to his left leg, he stopped his somersaulting flight and headed back toward the others. His path was erratic, as he evaded the attacking remoras. He moved without conscious thought, relying on some hidden instinct to second-guess the deadly satellites.

He had the strong intuition that Broken-finger was somehow watching him . . . guiding him.

The transporter and its crew had fled from the sector; the sled was

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demolished, his crew scattered. He didn't dare use any radio frequency, lest a remora home in on it.

He found Sam, and they went about the slow and dangerous task of gathering up the rest of the crew. Five were missing, five friends, five brothers and sisters. Anna chased down an oxygen tank from the destroyed sled. They linked themselves together in a long chain, and John used the tank to propel them in a snake-like dance away from the remoras. Omega-ten was a complex sector in the best of times, but now it was a churning nightmare. John held a sharp-edged picture of it in his mind as he threaded the deadly maze. Their progress was slow.

Your father sees one more thing in his fever. He sees you leading your people.

It was a long time before they were picked up.

Leighton sat at his desk and leafed through the confidential report of the sentry incident; the flimsy was as thin and light as tissue. This had been a tight one, and there was more to it than appeared in the report. Much more.

One thing was certain. A two-hundred-square-mile area southeast of White Sands was gone, vaporized. It was Macro property, and they had, as Leighton had predicted, made only a minor protest. They claimed thirty lives lost, but his contacts had put the final figure at 537. Fifty-two employees and 485 sleepers. Macro was keeping quiet because of the sleepers. Deep-sleep research was forbidden by international law. Macro claimed it was a microwave receiving station, but it had been a research installation. No matter. Now it was dust.

Ever since the radio signal that came to be known as the Rosetta Triptych was received from the triple-sun system 36 Ophiuchi, Trans-United and Macro had been involved in developing deep sleep. Each corporation wanted to make the first contact with a technologically superior alien race. Using the Cristal-Williston Fusion Drive, which had been successfully tested, and deep sleep, contact could be made in less than a hundred years. Not so much time in corporate terms, for corporations, unlike nation-states, were used to long-range planning.

Then last year a minor-ranking scientist working for Trans-United discovered a way to get around the neural synapse problem. One of Macro's spies got hold of the information, and an undeclared corporate war

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began. But after a failed Trans-United deep-sleep experiment was leaked into the newsnet, the public outcry was immediate and strong. As luck would have it, one of Macro's mass graves of sleepers was also discovered by a reporter for one of the "yellow shows." And that immediately became hot news. Within weeks the World Court had outlawed all deep-sleep experimentation. After that the corporations purged the rank and file of their security sections and simply moved their operations to other underground sites. Eventually the outcry died down.

The sentry ploy had been a gamble, but a carefully planned gamble. Any investigation would show that Trans-United's own property and personnel had been in danger, and that would clear the company of any suspicion. It would look like a program snatch. Leighton had banked on John Stranger's overwhelming tribal loyalty and ability to make instant decisions to pull it off. And it had worked. There would be no serious investigation.

Leighton shifted in his chair and depolarized the room. As the room lights were lowered, a thousand stars bathed the stark room in a wan milky haze. Leighton felt like an Olympian god gazing out from the heavens. He tapped his fingers on his polished desktop and tried to decide what would be the best use of the corporate asset known as John Stranger.

Held in place by restraint webbing that surrounded him like a loosely fitting cocoon, John floated in the recovery room. Med-patches covered his arms and chest, delivering carefully measured doses of medications. Above him a monitor blinked and clicked softly with reassuring regularity. He drifted with his eyes closed and his mind troubled.

John could not stop dwelling on what he might have done differently in those last few seconds inside the sentry. He had traded the lives of strangers for the lives of his family and friends. A feeling of helpless remorse filled him as he wondered about the people he had caused to die . . . the people he had killed.

Finally he fell asleep, slowly falling through the suffocating layers of guilt and exhaustion to a spirit world cobbled out of feverdreams. He saw Broken-finger. It was afternoon. The sky was clear. There was barely any wind, and the only sound was the buzzing of flies.

Broken-finger looked into John.

You must make your decision and then not look back. You must not

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punish yourself for the thing you have done.

The old man spread his arms, and they turned into wings. His face melted into the terrible mask of the thunder-beings. The thunder-being rose into the air, its great wings making the sound of a bellows pumping, and John looked into the face of death.

And saw himself.

He was the thunder-being.

Taking life.

Giving life.

Turning and crying in his sleep.

"Congratulations, Mr. Walstead, you've made it to the top."

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE UNRECOGNIZED DANGER

TO POSSESS the power of concentration is to have a useful tool.

When, as a teen-ager, I began to write seriously, I was living in the bosom of a family who were crowded together in an inconvenient apartment and who were, one and all, not the least concerned that I was writing.

I had no choice, therefore, but to work with blaring radios and arguing voices, and, since I lived on the second floor in a building on a busy Brooklyn street, there was also the obligato of booming traffic and the shrieks and shouts of playing children.

I had to learn to ignore it all, and to this day I can work unperturbed in the midst of miscellaneous activity. When I am perforce diverted from my work, no "mood" has been broken. I simply tend to the diversion in a more or less absent minded matter and, without trouble, pick up my work at the point where I had left off.

Very useful, indeed.

But it does mean that I tend to be unaware of things that go on about me, even when I am not working. After all, when I am not engaged in doing something, I am *thinking* about doing something so that the rest of the world recedes. This is a process that is not without serious risk, especially when I am threading through the streets of New York.

Someone who was aware of my absent mindedness was my beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, Robyn, who, from an early age, would discuss my peculiarities with her friends, but who loves me anyway. She once said to me, "I've spent my whole life laughing," which is a good way to spend your life, I think. I hope that she has spent much of her life laughing with me, for I do a lot of laughing myself, but I suspect she has spent some of her life laughing *at* me.

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One example of my preoccupation took place about a dozen years ago when I was giving a talk at Boston College. I was perfectly well aware that Robyn was attending Boston College at the time, and I rather expected to see her in the audience. However, the hall was crowded and I didn't spy her, and once I began to give my talk with my usual concentration on the task at hand, I forgot about her.

After the talk, a number of students crowded about me to ask questions, and I was answering with great vivacity, as I usually do, and with only the vaguest awareness of my surroundings.

Very casually, I noted a beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed young woman standing nearby, but my eyes slid over her without pause. This happened several times, until a vague feeling of having missed something pervaded me. I turned back to the young woman, and stared a while as I gathered my otherwise busy perceptions, and finally said, with a distinct question mark in my voice, "Robyn?"

And Robyn, for it was she, turned to a friend next to her, held out her arms helplessly, and said, "See! He finally recognized me. How many minutes did it take?"

But other things go unrecognized, too; not only by me, but by everyone. It's one of those unrecognized things I'm going to discuss in this essay.

One of the remarkable chemical discoveries in the 1890s was that of a group of gaseous elements whose existence, had, until then, been entirely unsuspected. They were relatively rare, existed in the atmosphere in percentages that varied from small to tiny, and were most notable for being almost totally inert. They existed as single atoms that did not combine among themselves or with others (with a few exceptions first noted in the 1960's).

As a group, these were called the "inert gases," though, in the last quarter century, the phrase "noble gases" has come into fashion.

Between 1895 and 1898, five of these gases were discovered in the following order: argon, helium, neon, krypton, and xenon. The names are derived, respectively, from the Greek words for "inert," "sun," "new," "hidden" and "stranger."

It is conventional in chemistry to give non-metallic elements names that end in "on" (as boron), "en" (as oxygen) or "ine" (as chlorine). Exceptions are those elements named before the convention was established, as in the case of sulfur and phosphorus.

Metallic elements have names that end in "um" (as aluminum) or "ium" (as sodium). Again, there are

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exceptions for those named pre-conventionally, as gold, copper and lead.

All elements named after 1800 adhere to the convention, except for helium.

Helium is a non-metal; in fact, it is the most pronouncedly non-metallic of all the elements. The trouble is, though, that the first indication of its existence came indirectly, back in 1868, through some lines in the spectrum of the Sun's corona. Since nothing could then be told about its chemical nature, and since a majority of the elements were metallic, it seemed safe to call it helium.

Once the element was actually located on Earth, studied chemically, and its non-metallic nature understood, it should have been renamed "helion," but it wasn't. I presume the chemists who made the Earth-bound finding felt it was important to preserve the remarkable priority of its discovery in the Sun and not mask that by changing the name.

At the time the five inert gases were discovered, the concept of "atomic number" had not yet been worked out (see "The Nobel Prize That Wasn't," April 1970). This was a pity, for had it been worked out, chemists would have known at once that a sixth noble gas had to exist.

The atomic numbers of the five noble gases are: helium (2), neon (10), argon (18), krypton (36) and xenon (54). The five numbers are then 2, 10, 18, 36, 54.

Suppose we imagine ourselves starting with 0 and working out the amount by which we must increase each atomic number to get the next one. We must increase 0 by 2 to get 2; then increase that by 8 to get 10; that by another 8 to get 18; that by 18 to get 36, and that by 18 again to get 54.

If we list these new numbers, they are 2, 8, 8, 18, 18. Perhaps you see that these numbers are the series of square numbers multiplied by 2. This 2 is $1^2 \times 2$; 8 is $2^2 \times 2$, and 18 is $3^2 \times 2$. Following this system you can then add two numbers that are each twice 4^2, then two numbers that are each twice 5^2, and so on. This would give you a number series like this: 2, 8, 8, 18, 18, 32, 32, 50, 50, 72, 72 and so on.

If you start from zero and add these numbers in succession, you get 2, 10, 18, 36, 54, 86, 118, 168, 218, 290, 363 and so on. This would give you a series of atomic numbers for an infinite number of inert gases.

In the 1890s, the element with the highest known atomic weight was uranium, and its atomic number turned out to be 92. Even today, nearly a century later, we had driven the atomic number up to only a shaky 106. There is therefore no use considering the atomic num-

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bers of 118 and beyond.

What about atomic number 86, however? That falls well within the realm of possibility, since the fairly common metals thorium and uranium have atomic numbers of 90 and 92 respectively. However, in the 1890s, no element of atomic number 86 was known, and, without the concept of atomic number to guide them, scientists didn't even know that such an element ought to be searched for.

So let's change the subject slightly.

The noble gases would have been *the* find of the decade, had it not been that, in that very same decade, radioactivity was discovered.

The noble gases were new elements that fit neatly into the already established periodic table of elements. Unexpected though they were, they merely served to round out the advances of the 1870s.

Radioactivity, however, did not just add on to what was known. It was a revolutionary finding that led to a remarkable change in our conceptions of what the basic constituents of matter were.

Radioactivity, however, was not an easy thing to untangle.

The original discovery, in 1896, was that the otherwise unremarkable metallic element uranium gave off strange radiations. In 1898, it was discovered that thorium did the same. But what was it that happened to uranium and thorium after they had given off those radiations?

We now know that radioactivity is a phenomenon that changes uranium and thorium into other elements (some of them hitherto unknown) that are also radioactive, and those change into still other elements, until finally non-radioactive elements are formed.

Realizing that this was what was happening (something unprecedented to scientists of the time), and demonstrating it, was, however, difficult indeed. The daughter elements that were formed appeared in excessively small quantities and could be isolated and studied only after heroic endeavors.

If only some of these daughter elements would isolate themselves and make themselves obligingly and easily available for study, the nature of the "radioactive series" might be understood at once and be placed beyond argument — an argument that might otherwise consume scientific thought and effort for years, or even decades.

It would not have seemed, offhand, that such an obliging event could possibly take place, but consider—

Uranium has an atomic number of 92, and thorium one of 90. Both

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of them decay to lead, which has an atomic number of 82. In passing from 90 or 92, to 82, the chances are almost certain that the radioactive series will have a member at atomic number 86 — which would be a noble gas.

To us, in the brilliant light of hindsight, that is plain, but to the experimenters of the late 1890s, who did not know of atomic numbers, nothing of the sort would occur.

Just the same, in 1899, Marie Curie (1867-1934) and her husband, Pierre (1859-1906) noticed that substances that happened to be near a radium preparation themselves began to show signs of radioactivity, even when they were then carried away from the radium. This "induced radioactivity" might be the result of the impingement of radiations upon the substance. Or else, some radioactive material might somehow have travelled from the radium to the substance and stuck there.

In that same year, an American physicist, Robert Bowie Owens (1870-1940), noticed that there were changes in the radioactivity of thorium if currents of air impinged upon it. The current of air couldn't very well blow the radioactive radiations about, since those radiations were moving too quickly and energetically to be affected. However, if there were such a thing as a radioactive gas, *that* might be blown about.

Owens happened to be working in the laboratory of Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937) in Montreal, and Rutherford took over the problem. By 1900, he had demonstrated that a radioactive gas was indeed formed in the course of thorium radioactivity. He called it "thorium emanation."

That same year, a German physicist, Friedrich Ernst Dorn (1848-1916), showed that radium also produced such a gas, "radium emanation." It was this gas that must have produced the induced radioactivity noted by the Curies.

In 1903, a French chemist, Andre Louis Debierne (1874-1949), who had discovered the element actinium (atomic number 89), found that it too produced a radioactive gas, "actinium emanation."

It became clear as these gases were studied that they were inert and must be related to the argon family. At first, it was assumed that they were three different radioactive gases, since each broke down at a different rate. There was a tendency, therefore, to call them "thoron," "radon" and "actinon," after the parent substances.

However, once atomic numbers were understood, it became clear that all three gases had the same atomic number, 86 (the one that

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Wherever uranium exists, and it is widespread in small quantities, radon is produced.

would have been predictable if atomic numbers had been known twenty years earlier).

By then, furthermore, it was understood that an element with a given atomic number might exist in several varieties called "isotopes." There was therefore a tendency to consider the three gases as isotopes of a single element that might be called "emanon" from "emanation." The name "niton" was also suggested, from the Latin word meaning "to shine," because a sample of the gas in a glass container made the glass fluoresce through the radioactive radiations.

Of the three isotopes, radon has a nucleus made up of 86 protons and 136 neutrons. The total number of nuclear particles is 222, so it might be called radon-222. It has a half-life of 3.823 days.

Thoron has a nucleus made up of 86 protons (the number of protons in various isotopes of a given element is always the same) and 134 neutrons, so it is thoron-220. It has a half-life of 52 seconds.

Actinon has a nucleus made up of 86 protons and 133 neutrons, so it is actinon-219. It has a half-life of 3.92 seconds.

These are the three isotopes that occur naturally in tiny traces (since they break down so rapidly). There are many other isotopes that have been formed in the laboratory, but none have a half-life of more than 15 hours, and none occur naturally.

Radon, then, which has the longest half-life by far, outweighs all other isotopes of the element; and, in 1923, it was decided to make radon the official name of the element, so that the three naturally-occurring isotopes are radon-222, radon-220 and radon-219. When I speak of radon in the remainder of the article, however, I mean radon-222.

Radon fits in very well with the noble gases, for its radioactivity does not interfere with its ordinary properties. Thus, the boiling point of the noble gases goes up steadily with atomic number. The most massive of the stable noble gases, xenon, has a boiling point of 166.0 K (-107.1 C) and that of radon is 211.3 K (-61.8 C).

(If it were conceivable that we were to manufacture an element with atomic number 168, it would be a noble gas that was liquid at more or less ordinary temperatures.)

Radon occurs naturally because it is constantly being produced by

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uranium atoms breaking down in the soil. Wherever uranium exists, and it is very widespread in small quantities, radon is produced. Solid isotopes produced by uranium breakdown stay with the uranium, of course, but radon percolates up through the soil and into the atmosphere.

How much radon is to be found in a particular portion of the atmosphere depends on how much uranium there is in the local soil, how porous the ground happens to be, whether the ground is wet or dry, how high above the ground the measurement is taken, how much fuel is burned in the locality, and so on.

Over the oceans, far away from uranium deposits, the quantity of radon in the air may be as little as 64 billionths of a gram in a cubic mile. (This is the result of scribbled calculations on my part, and I don't swear to the absolute accuracy — correct me if I'm off.) Over cities it may be as high as 20 millionths of a gram per cubic mile. In the atmosphere as a whole, I calculate there may be 100 grams altogether, or less than 4 ounces.

This tiny quantity may have its uses. We all know that rain is essential to life, but it isn't that easy to get raindrops started. A nucleus is required around which the molecules of water can gather and increase in number until the whole is heavy enough to fall. Dust particles are useful, and there are some who think the most effective are those that result from the constant bombardment of our Earth by uncounted numbers of micrometeorites. In other words, the fact that space about us is dusty helps support life.

It is also possible that radioactive radiations produce ions in the atmosphere by knocking electrons off atoms, and that these ions act as nuclei. Thus, the constant dribble of radiations from radon in the atmosphere may contribute to rainfall as well.

If a tiny quantity of radon is mixed with beryllium powder, the radon radiations knock neutrons out of the beryllium, and you have a steady source of such neutrons that will last for days. This can be used in cancer therapy.

Radon can be detected with great delicacy, so that by putting a tiny quantity of radon into the air or into the ground *here* and then testing for it *there*, it is possible to measure wind action or underground water transport, and so on.

An even more exotic use is this. Any change in the porosity of the soil will introduce a sudden rise (or fall) in radon over some particular site. There are tiny changes in geologic faults prior to an earthquake that could affect porosity and thus

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be reflected in a sudden change in radon concentration. If radon helps us to detect a soon-to-come major earthquake with sufficient certainty, and in sufficient time, to allow for evacuations and other safeguards, that would be a blessing, indeed.

However, radon also has its dangers, dangers that went unrecognized till only a couple of years ago.

Everything all about us has its traces of radioactive substance — not only uranium and thorium, but rare isotopes of potassium, rubidium, and so on. For the most part, the radioactive substances stay where they are, and it is only the radiations that strike us.

One exception is carbon-14, which is found in trace amounts in the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. It is absorbed by plants, incorporated into plant tissue, and from there, it finds its way into animal tissue, including our own. It can do damage there (see "The Enemy Within," September 1986).

Another exception is, of course, radon, which manages to percolate into the atmosphere.

Now radioactivity has existed as long as the Earth has. In fact, since the formation of the Earth, that major part of radioactivity that originates with uranium has declined to merely half of what it was at the start.

In any case, life has lived with radioactivity and has survived and flourished. Indeed, it can be argued that radioactive radiations are one of the factors that bring about mutations, and that they therefore serve as part of the engine that drives evolution and has produced us from the original primitive bacterial cell.

Since we live with carbon-14 and the damage it inevitably does to us, it might seem that we could certainly live with radon. To begin with, there is only one atom of radon for every 200,000 atoms of carbon-14 in the atmosphere (my own calculation).

This means that though there are always a number of carbon-14 atoms in the air space of our lungs, bombarding the delicate lung tissue with radiations that may conceivably do serious damage, there are far fewer radon atoms doing the same thing. Furthermore, carbon-14 can enter the body and be incorporated into our very genes. Radon, however, is an inert gas. It goes into the lungs and out of the lungs and, it would seem at first glance, that's all.

Why, then, worry about radon? There are three reasons:

1) Radon breaks down far faster than carbon-14. The former has a half-life of 3.823 days, while the latter has a half-life of 5,568 years.

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Radon atoms are, therefore, much more likely to produce radiation in a given short period of time than carbon-14 atoms are. Indeed, even though there are 200,000 carbon-14 atoms for every radon atom in our lungs, the radon atoms produce twice as much radiation per unit time as the carbon-14 atoms do.

2) Carbon-14 produces light particles of beta radiation. Radon produces the much more massive and harmful alpha radiation.

3) When carbon-14 breaks down it changes into harmless, stable nitrogen atoms. Radon, however breaks down into other radioactive atoms, including several that produce alpha particles — such as polonium-218, astatine-218, polonium-214 and polonium-210. The first three have very short half-lives and produce particularly energetic and dangerous alpha particles. What's more, they, unlike radon itself, are not inert but are quite likely to combine with atoms in the lung tissue and remain there till they break down.

The result is that radon is far more likely to cause lung cancer than carbon-14.

And things are even worse than they seem so far. Although human technology has not created radioactivity on Earth, it has tended to concentrate it in spots.

Here and there, human beings have engaged in the task of processing and concentrating radioactive materials for use in bombs, power plants, and so on. Inevitably, some of the radioactivity gets into the soil of the region and stays there. The soil is then very likely to be a long-term source of radon in higher-than-normal concentrations. What's more, there is always a danger that such radioactivity may get into the ground water and spread more widely.

In New Jersey, for instance, a large quantity of such contaminated soil has been collected from the yards of homeowners who had no way of knowing that they were living close to danger. Now the problem is where to put that soil. Not surprisingly, no one wants it in his vicinity.

This sort of thing can take place almost anywhere. Houses can be built in areas where the radioactivity level (either through geological or technological processes) is higher than average. Again, houses can be built of brick or concrete that just happens to be drawn from a section of soil in which the radioactivity level is higher than average.

The quantity of radioactivity, either in the soil, or in the building materials, is not likely to be overly dangerous in itself, as long as it *stays* in the soil or in the building materials.

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However, from the soil or the building materials, radon leaks into the interior of the house and may build up to concentrations higher than would be found outside the house in the open air.

This has become an increasingly dangerous possibility in recent years. In older times, houses were poorly fitted, and full of chinks and drafts. In our own energy-conscious times, however, we tend to labor to make our houses and apartments air-tight so as to minimize leaks of heat based on increasingly expensive fuel.

Then, too, whereas in summertime, at least, windows used to be thrown open to allow for ventilation that would somewhat ameliorate the summer heat and humidity, the coming of air-conditioning has made it certain that we close our windows tightly to conserve the coolness.

In short, we are making our dwelling places air-tight with respect to the atmosphere, but we don't bother making it air-tight with respect to the ground underneath. The result is that radon leaks into the house from the ground and the walls, and then can't get out — so it builds up.

Consequently a brand new activity of the average householder is to get his dwelling place tested for radon content. If it tests high, then one might try stopping all leaks in the basement floor and in the foundations, and, at the same time, try opening the windows whenever possible.

(I have recently read a report that denies that ventilation, or the lack of it, affects the concentration of radon within a house, but I find that difficult to believe. However, these are early days for the investigation of radon danger, and I'll await further work.)

In any case, it is suspected that radon is now the number two cause of lung cancer and that it is responsible for anything from 5,000 to 30,000 deaths from that cause each year.

The number one cause of lung cancer deaths, *by a wide margin*, is, of course, tobacco smoking. I view with a certain sardonic amusement, therefore, the fact that a heavy smoker, while surrounding himself and everyone near him with his noxious and poisonous effluvium, will be sure to go into a panic if he finds out the radon content of his dwelling place is a little above average.

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Jim Aikin's first story, "The Lilith", was published here in February 1981. Since then he has published many more short stories as well as at least one well received novel. His latest is a compelling contemporary fantasy about a group of creative people in New York City, including a tormented painter who produces a remarkable canvas that seems to have a life of its own.

DANCING AMONG GHOSTS

By Jim Aikin

I

THE ALMOND SAUCE wasn't thickening properly under the chicken, only scorching around the sides of the pan; and of course she had discovered halfway through mixing the special salad dressing that she was completely out of tarragon; and Tony was being no help whatever, which was definitely a disappointment — but then, he came from an old-fashioned family, so Carla guessed she had to make allowances. When she asked him to run down to the store for the tarragon and a couple of other things, he had wandered out of the room without actually saying no, and now he was sitting in the living room, banging out the same seven and a half bars of some fifties rock song over and over on the piano, which belatedly she realized she ought to have had tuned, just in case Guy or Dory played, or asked her to play. Tony was making the same thick-fingered mistakes every time, losing the beat, and starting again, all the while moaning tunelessly but emphatically, like a walrus flopping around on the floor of a shower stall.

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Carla wiped her hands on the brand-new apron, reached for the lid of the electric skillet to sniff the zucchini — and jerked her hand back, burned. The lid fell, slid, and bounced clattering to the floor. She sucked vigorously on her finger. "Damn!"

The piano and the walrus noises stopped. Tony appeared in the doorway, appraised the situation swiftly, and put on a grin that was more amused than solicitous. He leaned against the doorjamb and folded his arms. "Everything under control?"

She grabbed a dish towel and bent to retrieve the lid, which went under the faucet for a quick rinse. "I didn't know you played the piano."

"We had one for a couple of years when I was a kid." If he noticed her sharp tone, he ignored it. Which was one of the things she liked most about him — not only handsome, with his dark curly hair and square jaw, but willing to put up with her when she wasn't at her best. "My brother was the one that got the lessons. Lot of good it ever did him. You burn yourself?"

"A little."

He took her hand gently, examined and then kissed the red place, and murmured "*Cara mia.*"

Which was really very nice, she reflected. It almost made up for not getting the tarragon.

"What time did they say they'd be here?"

Carla glanced at the clock. "Seven. It's only twenty past. Why don't you set the table?"

As he was looking around in vague discomfort at the shuttered mystery of cabinets, the downstairs buzzer buzzed. Normally she would call down to find out who it was, even when she was expecting guests. But with Tony here, she felt safe enough to be reckless. She thumbed the black button, held it down for a couple of seconds, and went back to the kitchen. The cabinets and drawers were still firmly closed, but in the other room the stereo came unobtrusively to life with the first notes of the new Pat Metheny album. She throttled her annoyance. He is trying to be a good host, she chided herself. It's just like a bachelor. He's not domesticated yet. Or maybe all men were like that. What did she know about home life, coming from her background? She turned everything on the stove down low, so it would keep for a few minutes, and hung her apron over the back of a chair.

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When the doorbell rang, she sprang down the hall like a colt, but forced herself to pause in the entry to take a deep breath and survey herself swiftly in the mirror. Makeup in good order. [And the rest of her, much as usual — the straw-colored eyes set wide apart, nose a bit too large, generous mouth, hair cut fashionably short and streaked a lighter blonde than the roots.] A sudden stab of insecurity: she should definitely have worn something more conservative than the right gray leather jeans and bright turquoise sweater. The Rossiters were nearly old enough to be her parents, but she had persuaded herself that a dress would look too obsequious, that they would feel more at home if they thought she felt at home. Now it was obviously the wrong outfit. Too late to do anything. She squared her shoulders, smiled, and opened the door.

The solitary figure outside, huddled inside a large dark coat and clutching a rectangle of cardboard under one arm, was not Guy and Dory Rossiter. Carla blinked stupidly. A single luminescent green eye peered back at her, set deep in a putty-colored face; the other eye was hidden behind a shock of unwashed black hair. "Joelle. I was expecting somebody else." She realized how awful that sounded. "I mean, gee, it's good to see you. It's been — how long has it been? Weeks. Hi. Come on in."

"I can't stay. I came to drop this off." Joelle Cogburn lifted the cardboard rectangle a few inches, let it fall back to her side.

"You've got to come in, at least for a minute. I never see you anymore. You're always hiding in your studio." Awkward seconds passed; Joelle made no move to enter. Carla realized she was still blocking the doorway. She stepped aside. "You're looking good." A transparent lie. Joelle looked dreadful. Maybe it was that horrible coat. The fabric was clumped and threadbare, and it was several sizes too large for Joelle's emaciated frame. If she had bought it in one of the secondhand shops where she got most of her clothes, it probably smelled, too, sour and musty. "Let me take your coat."

"I can't stay, really." Joelle's gaze slid uneasily. "You're expecting company. Anyhow, I'm in the middle of something. I have to get back." But she allowed Carla to herd her into the living room.

"You know Tony, don't you? You mean you two haven't met yet? Oh, I don't believe it. Well, I must have told you about him. He's—"

"I don't—," Joelle began.

"Tony, this is my friend Joelle. Joelle's the painter. We went to college

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together. I told you about when we went to Paris, didn't I? Joelle is the one I went with. Now Joelle, be nice to Tony. He's special."

If Tony was nonplussed by the coat, he gave no sign. He extended his hand with perfect seriousness. "It's a pleasure." Joelle tried to raise her right arm; noticed that it was occupied holding the cardboard rectangle; started to maneuver the rectangle, which was covered with stiff, crinkling brown paper, around to her other side; changed her mind; grunted; turned her back to Tony in order to set the rectangle with great care on the coffee table; and then, instead of turning back at once, proceeded to shrug, in a series of bony contortions, out of the coat, which Carla snagged before it could touch the floor, and picked the rectangle up again and tucked it after a moment of deliberation under her left arm, before extending her right. During this entire performance, poor Tony stood with his hand out, smiling the indulgent smile of a man who is used to dealing with wayward children and has nothing better to do. Having permitted him a quick, nervous handshake, she trapped the rectangle against her body again with her left arm and right hand both, as though afraid a gust of wind might tear it from her.

Now where to put the coat, Carla wondered, gazing around in muted alarm. Not on the couch. There might be fleas. Even roaches. At the very least, spots of wet paint. Not in the hall closet; the Rossiters might be here at any moment, and it would be awkward trying to warn Tony not to hang theirs next to it. And certainly not in the kitchen, not with dinner on. At last she bore it away into the bedroom, where it collapsed reluctantly in a corner on the floor, like a mangy bearskin whose bear has gone on to better things.

How could she explain Joelle to Tony? She certainly didn't want him to get the impression that, well, not bums — Joelle wasn't a bag lady or anything — but people who didn't take proper care of themselves, were constantly dropping in on her. That wasn't Tony's style at all. Carla rooted in the top drawer of the bureau and found, beneath the hairpins and eyeliner, the snapshot taken the week before she and Joelle left for Paris. They had gone off after graduation to study art and music and drink red wine with earnest young Marxists in the cafés on the Left Bank; Carla's Marxists, she remembered, ate quantities of garlic, and Joelle's stole her passport. The whole fiasco lasted less than two months. They had been in the hostel only three days, when Carla picked up a newspaper and learned

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that Nadia Boulanger had died, which made confetti of the elaborate schemes Carla had concocted for getting introduced to her so she could show her the score of the *Nocturne for Orchestra*. Then Joelle's psoriasis flared up, and Carla got a bladder infection, and in the end they were both miserably seasick all the way home. But the girls in the photo didn't know that yet. One blonde and one dark, they were as alike as sisters, arms draped across each other's shoulders, grinning at the camera. Neither of them, when Carla looked closer, looked like anybody she knew. Or like anybody Tony would especially want to know. Feeling obscurely sad, she pitched the picture back into the drawer.

Back in the living room, Tony was saying, "Actually, if anything, sales is *more* creative than the so-called creative end of the business. What the artist produces is just a lump of coal. My job is turning coal into diamonds." He fingered a cuff link.

Joelle, in a paint-spattered sweatshirt and baggy trousers, was standing with one fist parked on her bony hip, head cocked sideways. Carla knew the pose. Expecting to see the disgusted sneer that would mean Joelle had decided Tony was a jerk, she stepped to Tony's side to protect him from Joelle's scorn, but then she saw that Joelle was barely listening. The iridescent green eyes were staring vacantly at some inner vista.

Carla leaned against Tony and walked her fingernails affectionately up his back. "Actually," she told Joelle, "it's a real coincidence, your dropping by tonight. The people that are coming, Guy Rossiter and his wife, Guy is in charge of the d'Arle account. He's the one who has to approve your work. If he likes it, he might even commission a whole series."

"I don't know if this is such a good idea," Joelle said. "I mean, I need the money. I don't want to sound ungrateful. But it didn't come out right. It kept getting away from me."

The downstairs buzzer buzzed. "That'll be them," Carla said. "Could you get it, hon?" To Joelle: "You did it the way I explained, didn't you? The woman rushing down the long hall?"

"That part's all right. But I wasn't sure where she was going, or why. I got confused."

"Joelle, you're beating yourself up again. We've had this conversation before."

"Yes, Mommy." Joelle wouldn't meet Carla's eyes. She stood staring down at the piano.

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"I'm not your mommy, but somebody's got to talk some sense into you. You're incredibly talented; you know that. But you always assume the worst. You assume people are going to despise your work for no reason. It's like you're walking around with a big sign on that says, 'Reject me; I'm no good.' Is it any wonder people reject you? You don't give them a chance to do anything else. Honestly, how are you ever going to be successful if you let your feelings get in the way?"

Joelle looked up. For a moment something golden danced in her eyes, so like reflected flame that Carla thought, Oh, Tony lit a fire in the fireplace; how nice — and actually turned to admire the burning logs, before she remembered that the apartment didn't have a fireplace. But all Joelle said was, "You're going to be mad at me."

"Don't be an idiot. I *will* get mad if you don't start acting more confident."

But Joelle wouldn't budge. "I *am* confident. I'm absolutely sure you're going to be mad at me."

The doorbell rang. Carla touched Joelle's arm and said in a lower voice, "Are you doing O.K.? You don't look well."

"I'm O.K.," Joelle blurted hoarsely. "I'm a little behind on the rent, is all."

"I thought Richard was helping with the rent."

Joelle's mouth went wooden. "I don't want to talk about Richard."

"I don't want to pry, but — are you eating? Have you got enough money for food?"

Joelle sank down on the edge of the couch and rubbed her knuckles stiffly. "I'm doing O.K. I don't need much."

Into the living room sailed Guy and Dory Rossiter, plump and glittering, moving like sleek ships in a calm sea. Carla performed introductions. "Joelle didn't even know you were going to be here tonight," she finished. "She just came by to drop off her proposal for the d'Arle account, and I insisted that she at least stay long enough to meet you."

"Perhaps she should stay for dinner," Guy murmured agreeably, "so we can get better acquainted."

Which put Carla in an impossible bind. Joelle certainly needed a good meal, to say nothing of the value of getting her name and face firmly planted in Guy's notoriously slippery mind. As simple a thing as an evening of sociable conversation might do her a world of good. And sending

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her off into the cold would be unthinkably cruel. On the other hand, she certainly wasn't dressed for dinner, and her abrasive turbulence could easily turn the party into a disaster. The occasion was important to Carla: not only her first evening of domestic entertaining with Tony as a couple, but her first chance to socialize with one of the agency vice presidents on something like an equal footing. Joelle would have been an intrusion, a disruption, even if she hadn't looked so disreputable.

All this flashed by in an instant. Carla smiled. "I don't see why not." If Guy was going to issue the invitation, though, at least let him make an informed decision. Carla gestured at the coffee table. "She was just going to show us the art she did for the layout." They all looked at the brown rectangle. "Well, go ahead," Carla said to Joelle. "Pick it up."

"I don't think this is such a good idea," Joelle said miserably. "Maybe I should just go."

Carla was getting irritated. Here she was trying to do Joelle a favor, and Joelle was too obtuse even to cooperate. Not only that, but what would Guy think the next time Carla brought him a free-lancer, if this one never even got out of the starting gate? "Joelle's always shy about having people see a new painting," Carla explained. Which was true, as far as it went. "She has a big bed sheet rigged up in her studio, like a stage curtain on a curtain rod over the easel, so when you visit, you can't see what she's working on unless it's finished."

"I can feel it afterward," Joelle said in a sepulchral monotone. "Even if they don't say anything. Their eyes leave smears, and I can't get them out." If the sheet was raised when you came into the studio, Carla knew, it meant the painting was finished. You could look at it all you wanted, and say whatever you liked. Joelle accepted praise and criticism alike with a bored expression, nodding abstractedly, often changing the subject without acknowledging the comment. Once a painting was done, it was a child abandoned by its mother; Joelle seemed to want nothing further to do with it. Yet here she was, fingering a corner of the brown paper and nibbling at her lip. Carla had never seen her display this kind of diffidence.

"My dear," Dory Rossiter gushed, "artists are always so sensitive. I adore art. You must show us what you've done. You must."

"Well, I guess so." Joelle held the cardboard out crookedly in front of her. "But don't say I didn't warn you." The paper crackled as she lifted it.

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They pressed forward. Standing on tiptoe so she could peer around Tony's shoulder without falling sideways over the coffee table, Carla was at the wrong angle to see details. At first glance, the gouache looked to be exactly what she had told Joelle the d'Arle perfume campaign called for —a young woman from the pages of a Gothic romance novel, fleeing (from some unnamed terror? toward the muscular arms of a young cavalry lieutenant?) down an endless hallway of brooding arches, her full skirt trailing behind her on the flagstone floor. The rich browns and floral highlights were perfect. Carla felt a moment of relief. Joelle had captured just the right mood to sell a perfume that, while not expensive, was meant to seem exclusive.

Dory Rossiter gasped, and Tony made a strangled sound. Carla wedged herself between Tony and Guy for a better look, and her warm glow drained into cold shock. The central figure in the painting, while wearing the right costume, fell somewhat short of a proper Gothic heroine's physical perfection. Her arms were slim, yes, and gracefully extended in poetic agitation. Her snow-white breast all but visibly heaved. Her face, however, was not lovely, not delicate, not alluring. The face was a bestial distortion, the jaw jutting forward to reveal vulpine lower teeth, the thick-boned hairy brow plainly modeled on a gorilla's. And from the walls around the woman, an elaborate frieze of imps and gargoyles leered menacingly down, demonic eyes glowing coal-red, their naked limbs obscenely intertwined.

Guy cleared his throat delicately. "It's really quite remarkable," he said. "I don't know that I've ever seen anything quite like it." He leaned forward to examine the brushwork. "Technically superb, of course. . . ."

Tony came to the rescue. "Guy, could I get you a drink? Dory, anything for you?"

Carla took Joelle's elbow. "If you'll excuse us for a minute?" She propelled Joelle in the direction of the bedroom. Over her shoulder she called, "Fix me a highball, would you?"

Joelle's green eyes glistened with tears. "How could you?" Carla stormed.

"I tried to warn you," Joelle said. "But you wouldn't listen."

"Cover it up, for God's sake. I don't want to look at it. Was this supposed to be some kind of sick joke, or did you seriously expect — *agh.*"

Joelle's hands were trembling as she fumbled at the paper. "I did the best I could. I didn't want to, but I thought maybe somehow. . . . I knew

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you'd be mad. I knew I shouldn't have wasted the time on it." Her body twisted crooked, like a puppet whose strings are tangled.

"Well, for once you were absolutely right." But Carla's anger drained away suddenly, exposing the rocky bed of shame beneath it. "Oh shit, Jo, I'm sorry. Never mind. It's all my fault. I never should have—"

"You were only trying to help. It's my fault. I'm just no good. I shouldn't be allowed to live."

"Come on, honey, don't talk like that. It scares me when you talk like that." Carla rubbed Joelle's shoulder lightly, tentatively, wanting to embrace her and afraid she would spring away like a startled fawn. Joelle rocked woodenly, staring at the rug. "How are you and Richard getting along?" Carla asked, knowing it was the wrong thing to ask but able to think of nothing else.

"I told him to take his mud pies and clear out."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry." Richard, Carla recalled vaguely, sculpted in clay, great brooding lumps stuck with broken dowels and scraps of burlap.

"Don't be. He called me an illustrator."

"Because you were working on this?"

"Before that. Why do I have to get stuck with these creeps? Why?"

"Peter wasn't so bad."

"Peter was a faggot."

"Well, I suppose that did have some drawbacks. Joelle, I wish you'd at least think about getting some kind of job. I heard they're hiring at Bloomingdale's for Christmas."

"You know what they do to you at Bloomingdale's?" Joelle's voice rose hysterically. "They make this nice, neat cut around the top of your head, and they lift a section of the skull off—" She mimed the action. "—and they make you sit under a big conveyor belt in the basement while they stuff you full of bits and pieces of *dead toys.*" The last two words shook with an acid mixture of laughter and dread.

"Joelle, are you feeling all right? You don't look well."

"They're all walking on glass."

"Well, all right. I guess maybe that's not such a good idea." Carla reached for her purse and brought out the checkbook and a pen. "How much do you need?"

"It's five hundred a month for that place. Do you believe that? Five hundred a month, and no heat. I called the landlord. I had to go down

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to the pay phone at the Laundromat."

"What's his name?"

"Weintraub. Morris Weintraub."

Carla hesitated, looked again at Joelle, licked her upper lip, and inked a check to Morris Weintraub for a thousand dollars. It would put a big dent in her savings, but she felt terribly guilty about the mess with Guy. It was all her fault, for not being more sensitive to what Joelle was trying to tell her. And besides, she didn't want Joelle to end up on the street, especially in this weather. "Give him this. And tell him to turn the heat back on."

Joelle stared at the check stupidly. "You don't have to do this," she asserted. "I don't need charity. I'll get by."

"It's a loan. And here — here's fifty dollars for groceries. I want you to be strong enough to take your stuff around to some more galleries. I just *know* somebody's going to love it before long. I can feel it. All you have to sell is one painting, and you can pay me back."

Joelle crushed the check shoving it into her pants pocket. "You should come by," she said. "As soon as I'm done with the new one, you have to come see it. I think maybe it's the best thing I've ever done."

"One of your ice palaces?" For the past year, Joelle had been doing interiors of oddly angled buildings — in the blue depths of whose transparent walls, weirdly refracted faces could sometimes be glimpsed, elongated like rubber masks and crying out in pain.

"No. You'll like this one. It's got music."

"Music in a painting?"

"At first I thought everybody could hear it. Dum-dah dum dum dum *dum*." Joelle's hand twitched in a spastic parody of an orchestral conductor. "It got so loud I couldn't sleep, and underneath it there were voices, a bunch of conversations all going at once. I thought they were having a party downstairs, and I went down and screamed at them, but then I saw there wasn't any party. That's when I knew I had to paint it."

Auditory hallucinations. Great. "Joelle, I really think maybe you ought to see a doctor. I can find out—"

"There's nothing wrong with me," Joelle snapped. "I'm fine. You're just jealous. You're trying to confuse me into thinking I'm one of your ghosts."

"Ghosts?" Carla was drifting into the headache she usually got sooner or later trying to follow the twists and turnings of Joelle's private labyrinth.

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"I have to be getting back." Joelle picked up the horrid coat. "They need me."

"What's this about ghosts?"

"The painting," Joelle explained, exasperated. "Only, see, they're my ghosts." She smiled thinly. "It makes all the difference."

"I still don't understand."

"You used to." After a queer, crooked, piercing look at Carla from under the lank lock of greasy hair, she said again, "You used to know." She squirmed into the coat, and shrank a little within its dark folds. "But you forgot."

II

A WEEK AFTER their first dinner party, they had their first argument. Tony wanted her to fly down to Fort Lauderdale for Christmas. For some reason that she couldn't quite put her finger on, Carla was desperate not to go.

"You don't like flying," Tony suggested.

"No, it's not that. I like flying. It's just — oh, I don't know." She didn't want to refuse point-blank, for fear he'd think she was rejecting him. If he thought that, he might start to lose interest in her. So she stalled, hoping he'd take the hint.

But he kept after her. "You'll have a great time; I promise. The weather is fantastic. Not like this crap." He gestured through the windshield at the lowering sky. Swirling down between the tall buildings, snowflakes were beginning to settle like a crust of powdered sugar on the rutted slush.

"I like New York at Christmas. All the Santas, and the lights. It wouldn't be the same in Florida. Why can't we stay here and have our own little tree and everything?"

"Mama is pestering me to meet you. And hey, I want to show you off. Anything wrong with that?" Tony flipped the Porsche into the left lane, accelerated around a truck, and plunged through a yellow light. "My brothers will be there with their wives, and they will *die* of jealousy. You're gorgeous. You'll be the star of the show."

"Well, it would be nice to get away from the cold for a few days."

"Right. They'll warm you right up. Real Italian hospitality. Make you feel like a member of the family."

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A lump of cold grease congealed in Carla's throat. "I can't. I just can't." That's what it was — family. After five foster homes in nine years, and the convent school in between, she didn't know how to act around a real family.

"Have you got too much to do at the office? Because I'll talk to Guy."

"It's not the office."

"Mama's got the guest room all fixed up for you, and—"

"Whoa. Whoa. The guest room?" Carla covered her eyes with her hand, laughing but not really laughing. "Let's see if I've got this straight. They're going to treat me like a member of the family, but you sleep in your room, and I sleep in the guest room?"

"Mama's old fashioned. You have to understand."

"Unh-unh. No, thanks. I spent too many years in guest rooms when I was a kid. If you're not honest enough to admit to her that we're sleeping together, and if she can't accept that, then it's not even worth discussing."

Tony's face darkened. "She's my mother."

"And how old are you, thirteen?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I live my own life. But she's entitled to respect."

"So am I, buster." She was surprised to hear her voice shake. Thirteen: that was the year she lived with the Martins in Cincinnati, Mr. Martin with his big red face always drinking beer at the kitchen table, and Mrs. Martin who never stopped sniffling and wiping her nose and whining about what a burden Carla was. She had prayed for the Martins to send her away, but when they did, she was surprised to find that it hurt just as much as the other times.

"It's only for a couple of days. What are you making such a big deal about?"

"If you don't know. . . ."

"I don't. Honestly, I don't. I'm *not* sure I *care*." They rode for several blocks in a silence punctuated by the thumps and whines of Tony's savage jerks on the gearshift. By the time he found a parking place, Carla was feeling thoroughly wretched. Wasn't this what she had always wanted —to be part of a family? What right did she have to march in and impose her own rules on them? You're simply not being sensible, she told herself sternly. What's so bad about a few days in Florida? You'll have to meet them sooner or later. Either that, or break it off with Tony. Which would

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be idiotic. Where are you going to find another guy with his kind of prospects? And if you do find him, and he falls for you, guess what? He'll want to take you home to meet his family.

Still scowling, Tony opened the door for her, and she stepped out into the biting wind. Well, all right. She'd go. She'd force herself. And probably end up having a wonderful time. But it wouldn't do to give in too quickly. It set a precedent. Let him stew for a few minutes.

The elevator, not plush but reasonably modern, whisked them up five flights. Tony took off his gloves, folded them, and put them in his coat pocket, still staring straight ahead. The door he knocked on was opened after a minute by a faintly shaggy young man in a rumpled shirt, who nodded and said, "Mr. Da Costa. Come on in. We've just got the basic tracks laid down."

The flat was larger than Carla's, but had far less free floor space. The living room was crammed with gear — a tall rack studded with winking lights and twitching needles, a tape deck with fat spools, and several keyboards on a tiered stand. She stopped just inside the door, awestruck as always by the mysterious alchemistic apparatus of contemporary music. She had once shepherded a piece of hers through the recording process, but that was with a two-track Sony on a table at the back of the recital hall, and a pair of mikes stuck up in front of the faculty string quartet. This setup was in another galaxy.

Two electric-guitar players, one with a six-string and one with a bass, coolly eyed the newcomers. The shaggy young man didn't introduce them. "Let me play you what we've got," he said. "See what you think." He tapped one button, and the tape whizzed, braked, reversed itself, and rolled forward. The speakers had no grill cloths, and the black cones pulsed and trembled with every beat.

The track was only sixty seconds long. When it had wrapped itself in a fast fade-out, Tony said, "What the hell was that crap? I thought you were doing the Cato jeans spot today."

The young man blushed. "Uh, that was the Cato jingle, Mr. Da Costa." Of course. Carla recognized the tune now, though she hadn't while it was playing. The arranger had built a haunting series of jazz chord substitutions on the hackneyed tune and poured them out like a layer of honey on a submerged girderwork of weirdly accented percussion, which boomed and echoed like distant cannon fire. "It's slow motion, is all, just like you wanted."

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"I know what the Cato jingle sounds like," Tony stated. "That was *not* the Cato jingle. You think I don't know the Cato jingle when I hear it?"

"Uh, Tony. . . ."

"Not now, Carla. Look, Stu—"

"Steve," the young man corrected. "If you'll just let me explain, Mr. Da Costa. We were trying to do something a little creative here. Just listen to it once more before you make up your mind; that's all I ask. Let me explain the concept."

"You're not getting paid to be creative," Tony snapped. "You're not getting paid to have fucking concepts. Let the people be creative who know what the public wants. O.K.?"

Steve rolled his eyes and squared his shoulders. "Sure, Mr. Da Costa. Anything you say."

"Because you won't last long in this business pulling stunts like that. Now let's get this thing turned around. I've got a deadline." Tony turned to the guitar players. "You boys know the Cato jeans jingle, right?"

The guitar players, both of whom were black, exchanged glances. "Yeah, we know it," one of them admitted.

"Well, play it. Play it slow. Dah, dah da-dah, dah." Tony's arm pumped up and down as he snapped his fingers. The musicians fell raggedly into line with him. "That's it. Keep it simple." Tony turned to Steve. "Well, what are you waiting for? Roll the tape."

"It'll be a lot easier if we program the drum machine first, Mr. Da Costa. We'll get a tighter groove."

"Drum machine? What the hell are you talking about?" Tony looked around, apparently noticing for the first time that there was no drummer in the little room, only an empty trap set huddled in one corner. "Where's the drummer?"

Steve patted a black box studded with big, square buttons. "In here, Mr. Da Costa."

"Why didn't you hire a drummer? Or did he just not show up?"

"It's cheaper this way," Steve explained with weary patience. "Plus, it sounds better. Just give me a minute to program it, O.K.?"

Embarrassed that Tony was behaving so badly, and guiltily aware that it was her fault, Carla did her best to wander away, which was difficult in the confines of the little room. She leaned forward to examine one of the keyboards. The knobs and buttons and sliders on the panel were thor-

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oughly intimidating, but she twiddled a bit at random, just to see what it felt like. At least the black-and-white part looked familiar. She poked a key — and the big speakers erupted in a cacophony of breaking glass. She jerked her hand back. But rather than shutting off, the crashing echoed on and on in a tangled, lurching roar. Both Tony and Steve turned to glare at her. Cheeks burning, she smiled meekly and sidled out the door. She wanted very much to stay and learn more about how the studio worked. One of the reasons she had been so excited about getting the job at the agency, a year and a half ago now, was that she wanted someday to get into music production. Well, today wasn't going to be the day.

The runner in the hall was badly frayed, and the kitchen showed few signs of domesticity, though the stove had evidently been cooked on a great deal. The table was littered with electronic components, tools, and bits of wire and solder, in the midst of which, like a plastic temple erected in the jungle, a small computer stood glowing. She sat. She wondered whether she might be disturbing some delicate process of assembly or repair by setting her purse and gloves in the midst of the clutter, but it didn't look like it. As nearly as she could tell without being a technician, there didn't seem to be any project actually in progress; it looked more as if bits and pieces of the insides of things had simply collected here, items that might once have had a function but now had none.

The computer, on the other hand, looked coolly functional. On the screen a video game was going through its demonstration loop. The game was called *The Amazing Snake*. In the demo the snake crawled out of its hole at the bottom of the screen and tried to wriggle up through the maze to the top. Blue daggers fell, and the snake twisted sinuously as it dodged them. A pair of red lips with white teeth came chomping toward it, and it had to dodge those, too. It ate a golden apple, and the daggers and the teeth froze for a moment. But always the snake got hit by one of the daggers before it got to the top. With a sad little noise, it would curl up into a ball and shrivel — only to appear a moment later at the bottom of the screen, idiotically cheerful and determined.

Usually Carla had no use for video games, but for some reason this one captivated her. After watching five or six repetitions, she drew the keyboard to her and started punching keys at random. In a minute she got the game to start, but she had no idea how to control the snake. It lay writhing cutely at the bottom of the screen until one of the daggers impaled it. She

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got three snakes, and the same thing happened to all of them. After the third snake, the screen flashed "GAME OVER" and went back into the demo loop.

In another minute she had figured out how to manipulate the snake with the cursor keys, but it was still getting killed every time. She hunched forward over the keyboard and started a new game. There was a pattern in the way the daggers came down the screen, if only she could figure out what it was. Scraps of music floated in from the other room, woven around a wordless rise and fall of voices. After a while the two guitar players ambled in. Carla didn't even look up at them. One drew himself a glass of water from the tap, shook his head, and said, "Man, what a way to make a living." His friend said, "You got that right." After a minute they ambled out again. The keyboard chords from the other room broke off, leaving only naked drum hits, which went on and on in an irregular pattern. "I'm getting it," she heard Tony exclaim. "I'm getting it!" Carla was getting it, too. Throwing her body from side to side in uselessly sympathetic exertion, she nearly succeeded in steering the snake to the top, but the spastic drumming broke her concentration, and the snake died again. And again. And yet again.

"That's a blind alley. You've got to start off to the right, wait till the first barrage falls past, and dodge back to the left."

She looked up. Steve was standing beside her, looking more harried and disheveled than he had half an hour before. She hadn't heard him come in. "I'm no good at these things," she apologized.

"It's nothing, once you get the hang of it. My high score is over a hundred thousand." Carla's best score so far was 160. "The better you get, the faster things come at you. Play it for an hour or so, and when you stop, you'll keep seeing the daggers raining down and the snake twisting away from the teeth. It does something to your brain." In the other room the bass guitar rumbled into life again, marching through a sludgy version of the Cato jingle. Steve shook his head sadly. "Can you beat the stones on that guy?"

"Mr. Da Costa and I," she said coldly, "are engaged to be married." It was a pointless lie. She wondered why she had said it.

"Sorry, I don't seem to be doing anything right today."

She wanted to say, *The way you were doing the jingle, before Tony butted in, that was right. That was wonderful.* She wanted to say, *I wish I*

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knew what those chords were. But this was Tony's account, and she didn't want to cause any more friction.

"Basically, it doesn't matter," he went on. "I'll do what I gotta do. If you want to be a success in this business, you just have to keep on pluggin'."

She nodded. "That's exactly right. I wish you could talk to a friend of mine about that. She's a painter, and — oh my God."

"Something wrong?"

"Excuse me." Carla jumped up, rattling all the junk on the table. She grabbed her purse and plunged down the hall. "Tony! Tony!"

Tony, his tie loosened, was frowning in perplexity at the drum machine. "It's not working right," he declared. "Why won't it—"

"Tony, we've got to go."

"It's the auto-correct, Mr. Da Costa," the bass player explained. "If you don't hit the beat—"

"Tony, listen to me. You're not listening to me."

"Darling, I'm right in the middle—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I just remembered. I was supposed to meet Joelle for lunch, and I forgot all about it."

"So what? Phone her. What's the big—"

"She doesn't have a phone. We have to drive down there."

"Carla, darling." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Believe it or not, this is not the first broken lunch date in the history of the universe. If you'd like, we can swing by after we're finished here."

"Tony, the lunch date was *yesterday*. Why don't I take the car and come back for you? Or you can take a cab and meet me somewhere."

"I don't want you going down into that neighborhood by yourself. It'll be dark in ten minutes."

"Tony, I will go to Lauderdale with you. I will sleep in the guest room. I will even kiss your mother on the cheek. Only *please*, let's go down there right now. I'm worried about Joelle. She's not well."

Tony seemed to be about to say something, but he checked himself. "All right. You can finish up by yourself, Stan. You know what I want. Have a cassette on my desk in the morning."

"I'll have to work all night." Steve rumpled his hair. "But O.K. You'll have it."

As they waited for the elevator, Tony jerked his gloves on one stiff finger at a time. "Do you believe the arrogance of that kid? Thinking he

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could get away with a stunt like that. Slipping his own music in instead of the jingle. I think I'll turn the cassette down, no matter how good it is."

"He seems pretty talented," Carla ventured.

"Talented kids are a dime a dozen. Trouble is, when they're too talented, they're impossible to work with. They get temperamental. Look at your friend Joelle. She's talented. She's also a mess. I don't know why you bother with her."

"Sometimes I wonder myself. You never knew the old Joelle. She had a lot of emotional problems, but she was fun. We had some great times together. Now she's — I don't know. I feel like I hardly know her. When she called me Monday, she was barely coherent. Maybe that's why I blocked it out. She kept rambling on about her new painting. Said she'd just finished it. There was something about it that bothered her, but I couldn't make head or tail of what it might be. She'd start to give me a straight answer, and then she'd go on another tangent. Maybe 'bothered' is the wrong word. She sounded excited, but confused. And scared. And defiant." Night had fallen on the city while they were indoors. A bus rolled by, the passengers immobile profiles framed in trapezoids of light. "She kept saying, 'They're calling me.'"

"I thought you said she didn't have a phone."

"She said, 'They need me to make the steps come out right.' That's what it was. 'They need me to make the steps come out right.'"

"The steps." Tony sounded bored.

"It was something about dancing. Dancing and ghosts. It didn't make any sense. But it gave me chills."

"She's a wacko. You'd be a lot better off if you got her out of your life for good."

"She needs me. She doesn't have any family." Either. "I'm all she has."

"That's not your problem," Tony said. "Speaking of family, though, I just wanted you to know that I didn't appreciate being manipulated back there. I don't want you coming to Florida to do me a favor, in exchange for another favor. I want you to come because you want to come, because it means something to you." He unlocked the car door on the passenger side, but held it open only a few inches, so that she couldn't slide in without facing him.

"O.K.," she said. "I'd already decided I was coming. I just hadn't told you yet. You're right. I should never have tried to use it against you. Sometimes I just don't think."

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Joelle's studio was on the top floor of a dilapidated walk-up on the edge of the Village. The door of the building was ajar. Tony maneuvered the car expertly into a tiny parking spot half a block down, and dragged a garbage can away from the curb so Carla could get out. She had left her gloves lying beside *The Amazing Snake*, and the metal edge of the car door was a knife of ice cutting across her fingers.

Even the cold couldn't rinse the smells of cabbage, cheap wine, and unwashed humanity from the hallway. Up three creaking flights, Tony stood scowling at the unsavory darkness while Carla stunned her knuckles pounding on the door. It was scarred and stained; the pale outline of a 6 was still visible at the center of the upper panel, punctuated by three rust-streaked wounds where nails had held it in place. A TV set blaring faintly from the floor below was the only response. After a minute she pounded again, and called Joelle's name.

"She's gone out," Tony said.

Carla rattled the doorknob. "Maybe. I've got a bad feeling about this. Maybe we ought to get the super to let us in. Once, when we were in college, she—" Carla pressed her lips together, unwilling to go on.

"She what? Went out for a walk?"

"Go find the super, please, Tony? I'll wait here."

Their sophomore year, Joelle had swung precipitously between outbursts of hysterical good humor and spells of sullen withdrawal. For days at a time, she sat on her bed, hair uncombed, responding to overtures with vague grunts, or by averting her face, or not at all. Coaxing did no good, but periodically some internal balance would tilt the other way. She would rouse herself, dress, and plunge into life with feverish determination, running everywhere rather than walking, fidgeting uncontrollably when she tried to sit still, chattering interminably about whatever lanced across her mind. Her laugh was like breaking glass.

It was Carla who rode beside her in the ambulance, and sat in the waiting room while they pumped the pills out of her stomach. That one had been hushed up, but the next year it was a razor blade, and they kept Joelle a week for observation. Cooped up in a tiny room in a youth hostel while the Paris skies dumped rain, Carla was finally irritated enough, by her own urinary distress and by Joelle's obtuse defiance and self-pity, to bring the incident up. "You know what you are?" she demanded. "You're just selfish. You don't give a damn about anybody or anything. You re-

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member that time you made such a mess out of killing yourself? It was me that cleaned up the bathroom — me on my hands and knees wiping up your damn blood! Did I get any thanks? Did you even bother to ask who took care of your mess?"

The rain drummed on the roof. "What did you use?" Joelle asked after a while.

"What do you mean, what did I use? A towel."

"What did you do with it? Did you keep it?"

"Please. I threw it away."

"You ought to have kept it," Joelle said. "I wish you'd kept it."

Tony's head appeared in the stairwell. "No luck," he announced.

By standing down there and looking up at her, Carla could see, he was trying to will her to give up and come down. She turned back to the door and surveyed it dubiously. "Maybe we ought to pick the lock," she said. "She might be hurt."

With a little sigh, he trudged the rest of the way up the stairs and put a heavy arm around her shoulders. "You're letting your imagination run away with you," he said. "She's probably downstairs watching TV with the neighbors."

"Do you know how to pick locks?"

"No, and I'm not—"

"Neither do I. Let's break it down."

"Darling, that's against the law. Would you please try to be a little bit rational here? This is not 'Cagney & Lacey.'"

"Break it down, Tony. If you don't, I will." Tony raised an eyebrow condescendingly. She set her jaw. "I will. Watch me."

He shrugged. "O.K. First rule of television detective work: Never break down a door until you checked to make sure it's locked. Saves a lot of trouble." He jiggled the doorknob, but it failed to turn. He shoved experimentally, and the latch and hinges rattled loosely. Placing both palms flat against the panel, he tried lifting sideways to pull the latch clear of the strike plate, but this did no good either. He rubbed his jaw for a second, and then stood back a pace and drove his foot squarely into the door just beside the knob. At the second kick the flimsy wood splintered and tore. By pushing the ragged tear open with both gloved hands, he was able to force it wide enough to reach through and twist the dead bolt. "Nice security," he commented. Downstairs the TV was still blaring; if the other

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tenants had heard the noise, they chose not to investigate.

The apartment was as cold as the landing. To the left a bare bulb glowed in the kitchen ceiling. The refrigerator was standing open, nothing inside but a blue-and-white milk carton. Pans and plates were piled in the sink, and the spigot dripped a measured *plonk, plonk, plonk*. To the right the studio was deep in shadow, a streetlight throwing the shapes of windows faintly on the ceiling. "Joelle? Joelle?"

III

THEY FOUND her sprawled on one side on the bathroom floor. Her face was mottled blue and gray. The eyes and mouth were open, and a crust of foam had dried on the lips. She was naked below the waist, and the bones of her knees and ankles stood out like chalk, as if they were already trying to force their way through the skin. The medicine cabinet was standing open, and empty pill containers lay scattered across the floor. Carla swayed against the wall, turned her head away, gripped the edge of the sink to keep from falling. "C—" She tried again; this time she got it out: "Call an ambulance."

Tony knelt and pressed a thumb in the notch below Joelle's ear. Caral couldn't look at the face. There was dried paint in the crevices around Joelle's gnawed fingernails. Tony shook his head slowly. "She's been dead for hours."

"Shit. *Shit.*" Carla slammed her open hand against the wall. It stung.

"I'll call the cops." Tony stood up slowly and moved past her toward the stairs. She stood leaning against the bathroom door for a while longer, not looking at the cold, stiff, naked thing lying contorted on the floor. "I'm sorry, honey," she said softly. "I tried. I tried to tell you, but you never did listen." After a while she pushed herself upright and walked unsteadily away. The kitchen was uninviting. She turned and went into the studio.

She had to grope for the light switch. At the heavy snap a white glare flooded the room. Joelle Cogburn's last painting stood braced between the twin pillars of the easel, which stretched from floor to ceiling. Twelve feet long and six feet high, the canvas leaped with color, swirled and sparkled with grand sweeps of glittering detail. Tears, wrenched free by the painting's beauty, flooded Carla's eyes, smearing the image into thick cobwebs of light. Gasping and sniffling, she pulled out a handkerchief.

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When she could see again, she found that the painting was of the interior of a ballroom, a magnificent high-ceilinged chamber in some palace of a century gone by, bejeweled with mirrors and chandeliers. Joelle had never been seduced into impressionism or abstraction; her subject matter was as anachronistic as her craft was meticulous. A masked ball was in progress in the ballroom: across the broad floor nearly a hundred figures were poised in the patterns of a complex and courtly dance. On a balcony between marble pillars, musicians were playing.

Carla stepped closer, fascinated. There were several sorts of people in the painting. What caught her eye first were the silhouettes. Six or seven figures, scattered here and there, were nothing but black cutouts, oddly jarring against the riot of three-dimensional color that flowed around them. Curtsying to her partner, a silhouette of a lady whose hair was piled in high curls, her mouth open in gay laughter behind a fan. In the midst of a group against the wall, a silhouette of a gentleman taking a pinch of snuff.

Most of the dancers were unreal in a different way. They were ectoplasmic, tenuous, only half visible. Though their features were discernible in the pastel light with which they glowed, the room behind them could be glimpsed through them. Some of the ghosts were wearing elaborate masks — boars' heads, tragicomic painted faces of stiff plaster, confections of feathers and lace. A few of them, while nonetheless aristocratic, were entirely naked.

Among the silhouettes and ghosts were ten or twelve fully rendered, solid people. A little girl in adult finery standing in a doorway, her mouth half open in surprise or delight, her mother's translucent hand resting on her shoulder. One of the musicians, his eyes closed, cheeks ruddy, head thrown back as he sawed contentedly on a viol. A jolly gentleman with a long wig of tight ringlets, whose portly stomach was threatening to burst his trousers. A young woman in a cat mask, who was lifting her skirt as she turned so that her petticoats and an ankle flashed. They were as real as the walls around them, but though they danced among and conversed with and laid their hands upon the hands of ghosts, they gave no sign that they knew, or cared.

The painting quite literally took Carla's breath away; for long seconds she breathed shallowly through her mouth, afraid the slightest turbulence would sweep the magical vitality of the canvas into a meaningless jumble,

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The ballroom was a bottomless sea of faces; her head whirled, she was falling into the sky...

like a living animal made of dead leaves. She was unsure at first why it had such a striking effect. Not simply because its vibrancy contrasted so forcibly with the cold, still body on the bathroom floor. Nor simply that it was the last work that would flow from Joelle's fevered brush. Not even the extraordinary ballroom scene itself. At last, Carla thought she understood: of Joelle's perpetual torment, the angst that had driven her for as long as Carla had known her, the painting bore not a trace. Even with the ominous silhouette figures, even with the sense of barely contained chaos, it was a testament of joy.

Or was there more to it than that? Something maddeningly elusive, and terribly important. But what? Carla's eyes darted into the painting, drinking up clues: the folds of a satin skirt, the polished buckles on a gentleman's shoes, the shifting scintillation of the chandeliers. A ghostly oboist's cheeks huffed as he tootled. The opaque viol player's arm raised to push the bow across the strings, and the knuckles of his other hand stood out, tense but graceful, at the instrument's neck. Carla felt she could almost hear the seductive throbbing of that viol. She stepped closer. Now the painting was all she could see. It wrapped itself around her, the grand sweep of the dance cascading toward her and away. The ballroom was a bottomless sea of faces, hands, ribbons fluttering, sparkling tiaras — and her head whirled, she was falling into the sky, the translucent dancers swathed in pulsing light, smiling at one another, at her, an unfolding web of turning, stepping, a nod, a hesitation, the oboe's careless tune skipping across a low river of conversation, the mingled scents of perspiration and perfume.

A hand tugged at her hand, and she curtsied to the gentleman in a powdered wig who stood bowing before her. He offered his arm, she took it, and they promenaded down the room. Her petticoats rustled. Three paces and a dip to the left, three more and a dip to the right. Her feet knew the steps. (Petticoats?) Now sweep forward, now back. She smiled at her escort, whose eyes twinkled. Something odd was going on, but she was too busy dancing to think what it might be. Weren't these people supposed to be transparent? But what an odd thought! Why should she think that? Their flesh was as solid as hers.

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A face flashed past, pale, hauntingly familiar, iridescent green eyes and gaunt cheeks under severe center-parted black hair. Carla stumbled. Suddenly her legs were heavy and stupid. She frowned at her feet, invisible in their soft slippers beneath the layers of flaring skirt. Concentrate. If you spoil the dance, the ladies will whisper behind their fans. You won't be invited back. Twice more she glimpsed the dark-haired woman, now across the room, now swept down the line as the harpsichord trilled out a march. There was some reason, Carla felt, why she ought to know the other woman, something urgent she must say to her. But it was difficult to think about anything while keeping step.

The intricacies of the dance seemed intermindable. Twirl to the left, a kick, and place her hand atop the next gentleman's. But at last the musicians wove a final ornate phrase into a stirring cadence. She curtsied again to her partner. He murmured some pleasantry, but she wasn't listening. She felt thoroughly confused, and somewhat frightened. Where was she? How had she come here? Did she know these people? It all seemed so natural, and yet—

"Does milady feel faint?" her partner inquired solicitously. "Perhaps a breath of air—"

"No, I'll be fine." She gazed distractedly from side to side, desperate for some clue. There! The black-haired woman, who was just now turning away, as if she might have been looking in this direction. Carla forged a path among the couples milling on the parquet floor, but the black-haired woman, after a swift frightened glance, slipped out a door.

Carla pressed forward. What am I doing? she asked herself. Am I insane? Why am I following this person? Who is she? Who am I, for that matter? Do I have a name? She faltered, uncertain, at the door. Was this the right door? A long hallway stretched out before her, rows of heavy pillars flanking dim arches. Was that the black-haired woman rushing away from her down the hall? Or only a shadow, a gust of wind that set the candles flickering?

A footman in livery materialized before her, bearing a silver tray laden with a crystal decanter and several goblets. "Wine, milady?" The wine lay as motionless in the heart of the decanter as an enormous ruby.

"Did you just see a woman come this way?"

"The wine is of an excellent vintage." The footman proffered the tray. Around its rim, their tails in one another's mouths, undulated a design of embossed snakes.

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She tore her eyes away from the snakes. "Why don't you answer me? Did a woman come this way? Did you see where she went?"

"Milady seems troubled — if she will forgive my saying so. The wine, she will find, is an excellent antidote. Those who drink of it forget all care."

Impatient, Carla brushed the man aside and plunged down the hall. It was longer than she expected — quite long, in fact — and she felt sure she was being watched; but when she turned to look back, the men and women laughing and drinking in the grand ballroom were paying no attention to her. The festive scene beckoned, and in her breast a flame leaped in answer to those in the chandeliers. But she was determined not to be deflected. She set her jaw and hurried on.

Ahead, on the left, a door set with beveled panes of glass stood just slightly ajar. Beyond the door was darkness. After taking a deep breath, which failed to quell the tripping of her heart, she opened the door and stepped through.

Night. Jasmine. A dove calling. Soft moonlight, and overhead ten thousand stars. The black-haired woman had stopped by a low stone balustrade. Beyond her stretched dark lawn smudged with pale statues, and shrouded in shadow the curving hedges of a formal garden.

"Joelle!"

The black-haired woman turned slowly to face her, head held high, porcelain neck as slender as a swan's above bare shoulders. For a moment, Carla thought she must be mistaken. She remembered Joelle now, and knew that Joelle had never had this calm grace. "Begging madame's pardon, but it seems she has confused me with somebody else." The green eyes flashed.

"Joelle, it's me! At least I think — this is all crazy. Where are we? What is this place?"

Terror flickered across Joelle's face, and was gone so quickly Carla wasn't sure she had seen it. "Are you enjoying the party? You haven't drunk the wine yet, have you? You must have some wine at once."

"I don't want any wine. I want you to tell me what's going on. I was in your studio. We'd just found—" No, she couldn't say that. "It was cold and dark. And then I heard the music — and the next thing I knew, I was here."

"A place that was dark," Joelle said quietly. "And cold. Perhaps I could remember being in such a place, if I had not drunk the wine. It is of no

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importance. Now I am here, and now you are here, and soon the dance will begin again."

Carla looked out across the dark formal garden. The statues weren't at all where she remembered seeing them only moments before. They had shifted somehow, like congealed smoke.

"I find it peaceful here," Joelle said.

Carla shivered. "I don't like it at all." Or was that true? Her body felt buoyant, tingling, electric. But everywhere she saw, or heard, or touched, was almost frighteningly strange. "I don't want to be here," she insisted. "I want to be back in— that other place. You brought me here. You may not know it, but you did. You've got to tell me how to get back there."

"Well, there is one thing you might try." Joelle's cool facade melted into an impish smile. "Click your heels together three times," she said with a twinkle, "and say, 'There's no place like New York.'"

"Aha! You admit it!"

Joelle only smiled seraphically, and spread her hands and cocked her head in a graceful shrug.

Carla looked at her friend appraisingly. "So you haven't drunk the wine, either."

"How much fun would it be if I didn't know the difference? But I don't have to think about the other place if I don't want to. Your being here reminds me. You have to go away. You don't belong here."

"Neither do you. This place isn't *real.* You created it somehow."

Joelle laughed, a humorless bark. "You don't know how wrong you are. The other place — that was the place that wasn't real. All the nasty things clawing at me, getting their slime all over me. You kept dragging me back, but this time I was too smart for you. I fixed it so you can't ever make me go back."

"And you think you can just stay here. Forever."

Joelle nodded vigorously. "Why shouldn't I? That's the kind of place this is. All the patterns fit. The colors match. The movement is perfectly contained. Do you have any idea how nice that feels? After all those years, I finally got it right."

"It sounds lovely," Carla admitted.

"There's just one thing. You don't belong. I could feel it when you got here. The steps started being wrong. You've got to go back now."

"I don't want to leave you here. We'll never see each other again."

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Joelle shrugged. "Maybe I'll think about you once in a while."

"I'm supposed to say that about you. You make it sound as if I'm the one that's dead."

Joelle said nothing.

"It is nice here." The scent of the night flowers was as thick as syrup. Carla's body was made of bubbles; it was made of cloud. "Could I — do you suppose I could stay for just a little while?"

"I told you. This isn't your place. You make the steps come out wrong."

"Just one more dance. Joelle, please!"

"That's not my name now. My name is Lucy." Within the palace a fanfare flourished. "You have to make your own place."

"What do you mean? How?"

"That's what you have to find out. It's hard."

"It's impossible. I don't even know where to start."

"Or — there might be another way." Joelle considered for a moment. "Yes. If you got here once, there's a way you could come back. You have to figure out a way to make the steps come out right."

"The steps. You're talking in riddles, Joelle."

"Either you know, or you don't know. I don't think you know. I think your coming here was an accident. I sucked you in after me, like a tornado." Joelle pointed at Carla's feet. "See? You're walking on glass."

Carla looked down. On all sides the broad paving stones were solid blocks. But the one directly beneath her was transparent, and through it she could see a nether sky thick with stars. Not a reflection, either. When she lifted her skirts to look, no upside-down Carla peered back at her. Suddenly dizzy, she staggered backward and sank down on a bench.

The fanfare sounded again. "The next dance is starting," Joelle said. "They need me. Good-bye." Framed by the light that spilled through the prismatic panes of the door, she raised her fan and spread it before her face, then turned and swept back into the palace.

Carla shivered, and hugged herself. I won't let her turn me away like that, she vowed. I have as much right to be here as she does. I'll stay for another dance, at least. And I won't drink the wine, either. But she felt too weak to stand. Something tugged at her deep within, something that slid like heavy oil. She closed her eyes.

Loud masculine footsteps came clumping toward her. "They asked us to wait. Said they'd be here in a few minutes."

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She opened her eyes, and started in alarm. She was back in the studio, sitting on a bare wood chair, wearing not a gown but her heavy alpaca coat. Tony was standing over her. "Are you O.K.?"

"I — I'm not sure. I felt — peculiar for a minute. Faint. I felt faint. That must have been what it was."

"You want a glass of water or something?"

"I'll be all right." The painting was jarringly active in the bleak room, like a greenhouse seen in a fever. She stood up and moved toward it. Her legs were wobbly. "Tony? Talk to me. Say something."

His voice behind her: "What do you want me to say?"

"Anything." Throw me a rope. Pull me in. With his presence like a rock behind her, she could look at the dancers, feel the ache in the bones of her fingers yearning to reach out to them, and still jam her hands deeper into her coat pockets and hear the traffic noises outside.

"So those are the ghosts, hunh? I think it's a miracle she could paint at all, living in a dump like this. I would have killed myself years ago."

"You don't get the impression that it's — almost *moving* or anything, do you?" Distantly, she could still hear the throbbing of the viol. She scanned the crowd for the black-haired woman with the slim neck and bare shoulders, but didn't see her.

"Moving? You mean like an optical illusion? Like one of those things where you put red against green, and every time you move your eyes, it jumps?"

"Something like that." Suddenly she was worried that Tony *would* see the painting move, that he would be drawn into it as she had been. Or that somebody else might come along and disturb Joelle's perfect world. "I want it," she said decisively.

"What?"

"I want to take it with us."

"Why, for God's sake? It's too big for your apartment."

"It's not. I know exactly how to work it. I'll rearrange the living room. I'll put the bookcase in the bedroom, and the piano—"

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Slow down. You're babbling. They'll have to seal the place up. We don't even know that her death was an accident."

She's not dead, Carla wanted to say. I spoke with her. Sensibly, she said nothing aloud.

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"I suppose you could arrange to get your hands on it in a couple of weeks," Tony conceded, "if you haven't—" He glanced at the painting and shuddered. "—come to your senses by then. Who's her next of kin? Do you know if she left a will?"

"Oh." Carla had forgotten that real life could be so complicated. "I think she has a cousin out in Ohio someplace. But if she'd ever made out a will, I'm fairly sure she would have told me."

"In that case, forget it. If the probate court doesn't just lose her stuff, which they do once in a while with indigents, you'll be lucky to get it by next summer. *And* they'll bill you for storage. Not just on the one painting, on all of 'em." He gestured at the shadowy rack in the corner, where huge rectangles jostled. "*And* somebody will have punched a hole in the canvas by then, or else there'll be water damage. Better forget the whole thing."

"No. I can't. She wanted me to have this one, Tony. I can feel it." Maybe I can even find a way to make the steps come out right. Whatever that means. No, don't be crazy. In the first place, you don't want to go back there. Who knows what it's really like? It could turn into a nightmare. And in the second place, even if you did want to go back, you couldn't, because there's no place to go back to. It wasn't real. Whatever just happened, it wasn't real. This is real. I'm trying to protect Joelle, that's all. Wherever she is now. No, even that's crazy. All it is, is, I want something to remember her by. "Look — the police aren't here yet. Why don't we just take it outside now, and kind of put it someplace—"

"Like on the sidewalk."

"Or in somebody's apartment. *Please,* Tony, say you'll help."

He curled his lip in amusement. "You've really got a thing all of a sudden about this painting, don't you?"

"So I'm being silly. Humor me."

"You're not being silly. I like you when you're being silly. Right now you're being completely unreasonable."

"All right," she snapped. "Be that way." Stepping up beside the easel, she lifted one side of the painting. It was heavier than she expected. Tony watched, arms folded. After glaring at him, she moved in behind the canvas and tried to find a way to grip it. Joelle must have been able to manage somehow. Grab the top stretcher bar like this, and then the crossbar.... She thought she had it, but then the other corner dropped free of the

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easel, and she swayed dangerously. "Tony, help me!"

"I'm having more fun watching!"

"If you don't help me, you can forget about Fort Lauderdale."

"I told you before, no wheeling and dealing. I don't like it."

"O.K., O.K. I'm sorry. I'll go to Fort Lauderdale whether you help me or not. Now, would you please help me?"

She heard knuckles on a door, and new footsteps. A man's voice said, "You the guy that called?"

"That's right, officer. The body is—"

"Hey, that's a new one. A painting that walks. You, lady." The cop peered around the edge of the canvas. Carla felt herself blushing. "You plannin' to go somewhere?"

"No," she said, feeling like a complete idiot. "It was crooked. I was trying to straighten it."

"Sure. Look, I gotta go look at a stiff, and then radio in for Homicide. You be here when I get back. Don't go runnin' off, O.K.?"

"Don't talk about her that way." The tears were starting again. "She was my friend."

"Whatever. You just stay put." The square face and the mustache went away. Carla stood helpless, the painting gripped in both hands. Her arms and shoulders were starting to hurt, and she was crying again. She needed to wipe her eyes and blow her nose, but she couldn't get into her purse for a handkerchief. "Tony!" she wailed.

When he didn't come, she lowered the painting carefully to the floor, sidled out from behind it, and leaned it back against the easel. The vivid rectangle of blues and greens and yellows radiated into the streaked and shadowed browns and grays of the room, perfection surrounded by filth. The cop's walkie-talkie coughed a few times. Carla shivered. She didn't want to see what they were doing to Joelle, but it seemed disloyal to Joelle to wait here, so after a while she crept softly down the hall.

Tony and the cop were both standing, pressed close together in the narrow bathroom. Their backs were to the door. Tony was saying something. The cop nodded. Tony turned and came down the hall toward her and took her arm. "Come on. Let's go."

"Don't we have to give a statement or something?"

"Yeah. Officially, we never left the apartment. We're just going to take the damn painting down to the second-floor landing and stash it behind

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the stairs for a while. And if you're real nice and say, 'Yes, officer,' and 'No, officer,' maybe he'll let me keep it company while you're talking to the coroner, so the neighbors won't get any ideas about taking it down to the pawnshop."

Relieved and excited, but confused, she helped him lift the painting. They moved awkwardly toward the stairs. "What happened? I thought you said—"

"Yeah. I gave him a hundred bucks." Tony paused to get a better grip on the stretcher bar. "You owe me."

IV

BUT WHAT with the rush of Christmas shopping; and packing to fly down to Lauderdale; and unpacking when she got back; and then in January her promotion, which meant she suddenly had hours of work to bring home every night; and then the preparations for the wedding, which Tony wanted to have in April because his parents had already scheduled their Mediterranean vacation for June — she never did quite get around to hanging the painting. At first she had it leaning against the couch, but then there was nowhere to sit except the piano bench. After a couple of weeks, she wrestled it onto one end and leaned it against the bookcase. Now at least she could sit on the couch, but the painting, being too long to stand vertically in a room with a normal ceiling, protruded into the center of the living room like a garage door that would neither open nor close, forcing her to detour around it twenty times a day. No matter where it was, it unbalanced the room drastically. Sometimes the couch and the piano seemed to be in danger of sliding down into it, as if they were leftover vegetables and it the drain in the kitchen sink, and at other times it was obviously much higher than the rest of the room, so that the furniture looked as if it had tumbled out like dice from a cup. "Why don't you just put the damn thing in storage?" Tony wanted to know. "I'm going to hang it," she insisted. "Next week for sure." She wasn't about to admit that she had been foolish to insist on bringing it home. Three miles with the two of them leaning out the windows of the taxi in the cold wind! (And when they went back to pick up the Porsche, of course three of the hubcaps had been stolen.) More important, she felt that she owed something to Joelle. Keeping her last

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painting on display in the living room, where any visitor could see what genius the world had scorned, was certainly a small enough gesture. All the same, she found day by day that she was less fascinated by the ballroom and the dancers, and more apprehensive every time she looked at them. They seemed a little less threatening now that she had to turn her head sideways to look at them, but not much.

At night, lying awake in the dark, alone or with Tony snoring beside her, she was sure she could hear the low throbbing of the ghostly viol in the other room. Some nights it was so soft she could mistake it for her own heartbeat; but if she listened closely, it seemed to get louder, to the point where she could make out the bass line of a whole movement, complete with sequences, repeats, and the modulation of the dominant. It was only her imagination, of course. The painting was an ordinary painting, no more, a thing of canvas and pigment. However evocative they might be, paintings did *not* make music. Thinking that they could was pure idiocy. One night, feeling enormously embarrassed, she set a cassette recorder out on the nightstand and turned it on when the music started. But when she played the tape back the next morning, there was nothing on it but hiss. Somehow, this was less than reassuring. Now *she* was the one who was hearing things. Could Joelle's mental instability have been contagious? No, that was ridiculous. Obviously the whole episode had been a hallucination brought on by shock. Incredibly detailed, yes, but her own unconscious had supplied whatever details the painting itself hadn't provided. Dwelling on such a bizarre and meaningless incident was morbid, morbid, morbid. Thinking she heard the viol at night had to be some weird kind of displaced grief. Undoubtedly, she ought to see a shrink, deal with the feelings, get it over and done with. To think she had seriously considered, even for a moment, something as lunatic as trying to make the steps come out right! Whatever that might mean. The idea that anything out of the ordinary might actually have happened wasn't even worth considering. This was New York, after all. This was the 1980s. Dead women simply did not go around sucking their friends into paintings.

Now that she was a junior account executive rather than a mere administrative assistant, Guy Rossiter put her in charge of an actual account. It was a very small account, but she knew she had to handle it exactly right. This was the opportunity she had been working toward ever since college — real responsibility, and the stability and respect that went

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with it. The client, a Mr. Edwin Abernathy, was short and fat and quite bald, and when he got angry, which he did at every opportunity, his voice would squeak and his upper lip would sweat. He was in persian rugs. The rugs were ridiculously expensive ("A Hakim says you've arrived"), and Mr. Abernathy expected Carla to help him sell an improbable number of them. He made disparaging remarks about the art department's roughs, he whined about the color reproduction when he saw the proofs, and he flatly refused to believe how much a two-thirds vertical cost in *The New Yorker*. He ordered her to get him a discount. "Yes, Mr. Abernathy," she found herself saying. "Certainly, Mr. Abernathy. I agree completely, Mr. Abernathy. We'll look into it, Mr. Abernathy." When she hung up the phone, she felt as if an army had marched over her. She stared at nothing, trembling slightly.

The viol's tune snaked across her mind, clearer than ever. G major, of course. A dotted rhythm. What would the melody be, above a bass line like that? She scrabbled in a desk drawer, looking for music paper. She thought she remembered dropping some in there one day when she was making room in her briefcase for a stack of media abstracts, but it was gone now. A notepad, then. She drew quick, wobbly staves: 3/4 time. A pickup. Continuo?

She listened for the tune, but it was gone. Something like this, though. She sketched four bars, frowned at them, erased one note and then another, scribbled furiously. The second and third versions of the line looked no more correct than the first. She wadded the sheet of paper up and pitched it at the wastebasket. It bounced onto the carpet. She drew more staves, carefully this time, and tried again Maybe it wasn't 3/4. Maybe it wasn't a saraband. Maybe it was an Allemande. Must be. Sarabands never had pickups. Or did they? She couldn't remember. Or maybe there was more than one movement. That would explain the confusion. Allemande, saraband, courante, minuet, gigue. Some kind of motivic cell to tie them all together. Up a third and back down by seconds, then up a fifth and back down. That would invert nicely starting on either the third of the fifth, or even on the seventh over the dominant. . . .

She stopped, realizing what she was doing. This was ridiculous. Sitting in an office in midtown Manhattan, roughing out a baroque dance suite —a twelve-tone row, perhaps, or some minimalist phase patterns with hocketing — that you could take seriously. Even so, this would be the wrong

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time and place for it. She tore the second piece of paper out of the pad, retrieved the first and carefully smoothed it, placed one atop the other, and tore them both into tiny squares. As she was dumping the little yellow scraps firmly into the wastebasket, Tony came in. He nodded approvingly. "Getting rid of the evidence. Always a good idea. Mind if I take a look?" Bending over, he retrieved a ragged sheaf.

"It's nothing," she told him. "Nothing at all."

In the big mirror in the upstairs lobby, on her way out for lunch, out of the corner of her eye, she thought for a moment that she saw a gentleman in periwig and knee breeches, taking a pinch of snuff.

She whirled and stared. There was nobody, only an old black man in coveralls, pushing a broom.

She dismissed the idea that she was being haunted, but she admitted that she was obsessed, and she didn't like being obsessed. Her unconscious, she decided, had turned traitor. It was throwing out ballroom imagery at random because the stuff never had a chance to drain away; every time she walked past the painting, it gave her a fresh refill. That evening she tried to drape a sheet over it, but none of her sheets was big enough. Even when she safety-pinnned two of them together, a band of color leaked out. All right, then. Let Tony make fun of her. She had had enough. After a quick trip downstairs to make sure there was room in the basement, because she knew she'd never be able to get the painting back up the stairs by herself, she dragged it out and down three flights — bump, bump, slide, bump, turn, slide, bump, bump. Halfway through the basement door, breathing hard, she thought she felt a hand touch her hand. She dropped the painting and shrank back with a stifled cry. But the touch — and of course it couldn't actually have been a touch — was not repeated. Under a single forty-watt bulb, the ballroom scene was less imposing than it had been upstairs. It glittered dimly, rippling with hypnotic allure, but failed to enfold her. Gathering her courage, she wrestled the canvas against the handlebar of a rusty one-wheeled bicycle. She got thoroughly dusty clearing a space against one wall, and when she finally got the painting maneuvered into place and discovered how obscenely exotic the ballroom looked surrounded by shipping trunks and old end tables, she was too exhausted to drag it out again and turn it around to face the wall. Instead, she went back upstairs for the sheets and safety pins. Having installed the makeshift shroud, she dusted her hands off firmly, locked the basement,

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and went upstairs without looking back.

For a week or so, she rose early, plunged into her work at the agency with deliberate enthusiasm, and came home at night dead tired, to fall into a dreamless sleep. The night came, however, when she awakened to hear scraps of music whispering under the bedroom door. Scalp prickling even as she damned herself for her own foolishness, she unplugged a lamp and tiptoed out brandishing it, expecting, as in a bad "Twilight Zone" episode, to see that the painting had magically returned to haunt the apartment. It hadn't, of course. But she felt too fidgety to go back to bed. Instead, she sat down and tried to pick out the gavotte (was it a gavotte?) on the piano. Something like that, yes. She hopped up and dug the score paper out of the piano bench. Now a pencil. In the kitchen. She jotted down a phrase, crossed it out, sketched another, added an alto line, chewing the pencil and jerkily conducting the air the way she had in college. Do you suppose this would be easier, she chided herself, if you did a little composing once in a while? But this was ridiculous; whatever she would be composing, if she were composing, it certainly wouldn't be gavottes. After an hour or so, she had the sensation that she was actually getting somewhere, that at least the first phrase of a binary-form gavotte was down on paper and that it did resemble closely the piece the viol had actually been playing. Eyelids grainy, she dragged herself back to bed. But in the morning she could barely tell which notes were on lines and which on spaces. Some of the bars clearly had too many beats, or too few. Disgusted with herself, she tossed the scribbled sheets in the garbage.

The next afternoon, Guy Rossiter called her into his office. Mr. Abernathy was there, pacing up and down in an eddying cloud of cheap cigar smoke. "Ah, Carla," Guy said smoothly. "I'm afraid we've got something of a problem. Mr. Abernathy has just received his bill."

"It's outrageous," Abernathy interjected.

Carla said, "I checked the bill myself, Mr. Rossiter."

"It's about this item here." Guy pushed the bill toward her on the desk and tapped it with a manicured nail. "The *New Yorker* insertion. Mr. Abernathy tells me that you promised him there would be a 15 percent discount."

"I promised him I'd look into it, and I did. There was no basis for a discount, not unless we went to a ten-time rate, and that would have been only 5 percent. My understanding was that Mr. Abernathy wanted only

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the single insertion, so we had to pay full price."

"That's not what you told me," Abernathy squeaked. "You told me there'd be a discount. This is totally unacceptable."

"It is only a verbal agreement by a junior employee," Guy said, looking faintly embarrassed, "but of course we'll be happy to honor it. Carla, please prepare Mr. Abernathy a new bill that reflects the discount."

She opened her mouth to protest — and stopped. Where Guy's hand hovered above the desk, she could see his glasses, and the edge of the blotter, quite distinctly *through* the hand. And the back of the chair through his chest. Head spinning, she turned to Abernathy and reached for his arm to steady herself, but he was shimmering slightly as well, not really transparent but not fully opaque, either. She stifled a gasp. She had a wild impulse to turn and run, but a sensible scrap of her mind hauled her back. This was her first account after a big promotion. She *had* to keep herself under control, no matter what. With a supreme effort of will, she stared straight at Guy until he stopped being gauzy, and solidified once more. "Of course," she said evenly. She turned to Mr. Abernathy. "I'm really very sorry about the misunderstanding," she informed him. "I'll take care of it right away."

"That's more like it." Abernathy stuck his cigar into his face and turned to stare out the window.

"Will that be all, Mr. Rossiter?"

"For now, yes. I'll want to talk to you a little later."

As she shut the door very quietly behind her, she was fighting her legs, which wanted to twitch and buckle. Nothing had happened, nothing at all. It was just the cigar smoke drifting in odd patterns, irritating her eyes. Once she had gotten a drink from the drinking fountain and started to calm down, she could see that Guy must know she would never have promised a discount. But in the interest of keeping the account, he was perfectly willing to shame her in front of a client. Later he would be fatherly, maybe even apologize. And she'd tell him, she knew, that it was all right, that it wasn't important, that he'd done the right thing. It *was* the right thing, too. Keeping the account happy was worth a few dollars. Abernathy would be good for ten times as much business if he thought he'd put one over on them. Or maybe he actually had misunderstood. Either way, it was silly of her to get mad. Silly and dangerous. She'd have to remember to keep a tighter rein in the future.

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The week before the wedding, Tony had to fly down to New Orleans unexpectedly to supervise a TV spot that was being shot on location, so Carla was left to close up her apartment by herself. He already had furniture, of course, and dinnerware, and sheets and towels. She sorted her possessions into one stack to keep and another stack for Goodwill. But things kept bouncing from stack to stack. If she kept everything that had sentimental value, Tony's flat — their flat — would be jammed with useless junk. It was a struggle deciding what simply had to go, no matter how she might feel about it, and what she was actually justified in keeping. Tony, being more sensible about such things, would have been a big help, but Tony was in New Orleans. There were the cartons of books she'd kept from college, for instance — ethics, comparative religions, Greek tragedies. Why keep carting it all around? And the bust of Mozart that the Sisters had given her when she got the scholarship. It was too large, and not in very good taste, but the piano would look lonely without it. She wasn't even sure how Tony felt about the piano, if it came to that. It was only an old Ivers & Pond spinet, with deep scuff marks on the legs, a spongy action, and a muffled, nasal tone. On their combined salaries, they'd be able to afford a really nice baby grand. Maybe she ought to have it hauled away. On the other hand, getting Tony to agree to buy a good piano might be easier if she had a bad piano around for him to be embarrassed by. She dithered.

At last, knowing that Tony would be back in a day or two, and that he wouldn't be pleased to see that she was still entangled in the packing process, she talked Honey Maxwell into coming over on Saturday on the pretext of needing help wrapping dishes. Honey was from Tennessee, and had drifted into the secretarial pool at the agency after an unsuccessful modeling career. She had long legs and flawless skin and curly hair the color of her name. During the first weeks when she was going out with Tony, Carla had worried that he was casting an eye too often and too appreciatively in Honey's direction, stopping by Honey's desk on too many transparent pretexts. But Honey drew her aside and drawled, "Don't worry, sugar, I never touch another woman's man. My mama tried it once, and the other woman shot her." Since then, Carla and Honey had gotten along fine.

Honey arrived in jeans and a work shirt tied at the midruff, and stood, fists on hips, surveying the wreckage of the living room. "How much rent

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do you pay on this place? It's cozy. Have you given notice yet? Me and a girlfriend could get along in here just fine. Little lace curtains and things."

"Oh, that reminds me. Look at this." Carla dug in a box and carefully unwrapped the tissue from around a pair of dolls in period costume that she had picked up in Paris.

"Well, aren't they cute? Look at that."

"This one's ear broke off," Carla confessed, "but I glued it back on."

"You can hardly see the crack. They are darlin'."

"Do you want them? I can't keep everything, but I just hate to throw them away."

"Why, sure, I guess. What else you got in there?"

So they spent an hour on the floor, drinking coffee and delving into cartons and oohing and ahhing over this and that. Every item reminded Carla of some story from her past. She talked about growing up and college and her job and Tony and Tony's parents and how they were flying up for the wedding even though it was to be a small civil ceremony.

"You gonna have anybody stand up for you?" Honey wanted to know.

"No." Carla stared into her coffee. "I had a friend in college that for years I thought would just naturally be my maid of honor, but we kind of drifted apart. She died just a couple of months ago."

"That is so sad."

"She killed herself. I miss her. I didn't always treat her as well as I should. But she made it hard. She was — crazy, basically."

"I had a cousin once went crazy," Honey said, nodding soberly. "They had to lock him up. Said he was a menace. He was, too. Slashed ever so many tires one time before they caught up with him, and killed a dog. . . ."

"Joelle wasn't a menace, except to herself. She just never could quite figure out how to live in the real world, you know?"

"Elmer was like that. He *definitely* was not livin' in the real world. Some of the things he said he saw — aliens from space and who knows what-all. Mama made us all go down visit him one time, in the nuthouse, and the way he carried on! Said the whole place was on fire; I remember that. An' I was the Blessed Virgin Mary, he said — not that we was R.C., you understand; just his mind worked that way — and I hadn't been a virgin for a good two years, only I didn't dare set him straight, not with Mama standin' there." She laughed merrily. "Good old Elmer. I hadn't thought about him in I don't know how long."

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"Thanks. I needed to hear you say that. I think I was starting to build Joelle up into more than she was, because of the way she died. I got to thinking — you know, that she was in touch with some weird power, some mystical force. But she wasn't. She was just a poor, scared, confused woman. I mean, her paintings were great, they were wonderful, but there was never anything more to it than that."

"I don't follow you, sugar. What more would there have been?"

Carla laughed uneasily. "Well — promise you won't tell anybody at work. I would die if it got back to Tony."

"My lips are sealed."

"I'm glad this came up. I guess I needed to tell somebody. What happened was, I had this sort of psychic experience, the night Joelle died. She had just finished a painting the day before, and I — how can I put this? I thought I saw her in the painting. It was incredibly vivid. I mean, she spoke to me. In the painting. After she died."

Honey's shoulders bunched in a shiver. "You're givin' me the willies, girl."

"I know. It gives me the willies, too. I try not to think about it. But I don't believe in ghosts. It was shock, that's all. We'd just found her, on the bathroom floor, and I was in a state of shock. I kind of blacked out for a minute. Come on." Carla scambled to her feet. "I'll show you."

"Show me what?"

"The painting. Bring your coffee. It's downstairs."

Honey unfolded her legs and stood up. "Do I want to see this?"

"Sure. It won't hurt you. It's just a big painting. It's a ballroom scene. There're like a hundred people in this big ballroom, and they're dancing a gavotte or something. It's right out of the eighteenth century."

"You mean with the petticoats and all?"

"And the wigs and brass buckles." Carla snapped back the dead bolt and led the way down the hall. "I haven't figured out yet what I'm going to do with it when I move. Maybe give it to Goodwill."

"I don't know if they take paintings, sugar."

"No, I guess not. What we ought to do, we ought to just haul it out to the dumpster right now. Unless you want it. Hanging onto it is like hanging onto Joelle. It'd be healthier to get the whole thing behind me."

"Well, let me take a look at it first. It doesn't sound like my style, but you never know."

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Carla unlocked the basement door and groped for the light switch. The bulb flared. A rat, or something that sounded like a rat, skittered away into a corner. She led the way across the cold and musty room. Honey, looking dubious, picked her way gingerly among the cartons and broken things.

The painting was still draped with the pinned sheets, which had sagged in uneven folds. Standing at one end of the canvas, Carla flipped the sheets up and back. Dust billowed, and Honey sneezed and waved it away from her face. "She really was quite a painter," Carla said. "What do you think?"

Honey's brows pinched. "I don't get it," she said. "You said there was a bunch of people dancin'?"

Carla stepped back to look at the painting. And cried aloud in dismay. A chill struck at her core and rushed outward, as if her blood were being sucked away into some icy underground reservoir.

The ballroom — and clearly it was the same ballroom — was shrouded now in night. Blue moonlight pooled beneath an open window. A single candle was guttering in its holder by one of the music stands on the balcony; at the edge of its fading glow, a yellow sheet of parchment, tattered and dog-eared, lay forgotten where it had fluttered to the floor.

Of the dancers, the musicians, the servants, of the ghosts and silhouettes and all the rest, not a trace remained.

"You s'pose she used some kind of disappearin' ink? Or is this just a different painting?"

Carla shook her head. "It's the same painting." The heaviness in her heart was as thick as the day she found Joelle lying dead. But this time it was a part of herself she had lost. Half blinded by tears, she stepped toward the painting and reached out to pick up the sheet of parchment. But her fingers bumped the surface of the canvas. She grasped at the air again, knowing it was futile, feeling the emptiness where the fingers met the thumb.

"Brrr," Honey said. "It's chilly in here."

"Let's go upstairs." Carla stepped back — and her foot hit something that clattered and clanked. A tray and a bottle. The tray was badly dented, and cheap tarnished metal showed through the ragged gaps where the paint had flecked off. The bottle was dark green and had a plain cork. It had fallen on its side when she kicked it. She picked it up and turned it

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around. There was no label, only smudged dust. By its heft and gurgle, it was nearly full; and by its dark opacity, the wine was red. "Where did this come from?"

"It was there all the time, sugar. At least, I guess it was. I didn't notice. You musta stepped right around it. If it'd been a snake, it woulda bit you."

Snakes. Of course. Carla knelt and examined the tray. In the patches of paint that still clung to the scratched metal, she could just make out a crude design of snakes with other snakes' tails in their mouths.

She tossed the tray aside and stood up. "Let's go upstairs," she said with forced enthusiasm. "You want a glass of wine?"

Honey looked at the bottle doubtfully. "My Mama taught me never to drink liquor from a bottle that didn't have a label on it."

"Well, then maybe I'll drink it myself." Carla switched off the light and pulled the basement door shut. "Or maybe I won't." Which would be better, she wondered as she followed Honey up the stairs. To know, always, what you had missed in life? Or not to know?

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 44

In which you were asked to coin a term based upon one or more names of an SF or fantasy luminary and provide a fitting definition for the term. There were fewer than usual entries but those sent were of a high (and hilarious) quality. Many of you came up with similar terms but provided differing definitions; there were just a few duplicates: Bradberries, Spinrads. The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

HEIN LINE, *n.*, Any variation of the sentiment "Human beings are the roughest, toughest, smartest, sexiest, etc. creatures in the Galaxy."

ASIMOVE, *v.i.*, To type rapidly and clearly about anything under the sun.

KYRIE ELLISON (*Rom. Cath. Ch.*) Latin for "Harlan, forgive us."

WILLIAM GIBSON, *n.*, Three ounces of gin and a trace of vermouth, shaken with ice, strained, and served over a live battery.

STURGIN', *v.i.*, Declaring that 90% of everything is crap.

Joe Haldeman
Gainesville, FL

* * *

SECOND PRIZE

LOVERCRAFT, *n.*, An anti-gravity "Love Boat" with a reputation for sinister doings on board.

ASIMOV COCKTAIL, *n.*, A verbal bomb detonated by the mention of any subject, resulting in an explosion of at least 5,000 words.

DAME and KNIGHT, *n.'s*, Lavatory gender designations for use in sword and sorcery tales.

MOORCOCK, *n.*, A large, dark rooster resembling a turkey, which presides over cockfights as Master of the Pit.

Lee Crawley
Eugene, OR

RUNNERS UP

RUCKERSACK, *n.*, A small, four-dimensional bookbag favored by European university students and hyperspace manifestations.

NO-DOZOIS, *n.*, An over-the-counter stimulant which gives one the energy to read all the short SF published in any given month.

GIBSON GIRL, *n.*, The archetypical turn-of-the-century female; active, emancipated, and armed to the teeth with postmodern biochip weaponry.

Angus MacDonald
Concord, CA

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SABERHAGEN, *v.*, The act of cutting and hacking ugly old women with a cavalry sword.

TERRY BROOK, *n.*, A small, man-made stream the banks of which are lined with terry cloth. See also TERRY.

CORNBLUTH, *v.*, The act of threatening someone with an ear of corn when you really have no intention of using it.

Richard R. Moore
Mt. Pleasant, NC

HONORABLE MENTIONS

GHOULART, *n.*, A form of drawing predominantly practiced by the recently undead.

SIMAK, *n.*, Sound produced by a falling body when it hits the siment.

Steven Sawicki
Woodbury, Ct

BUDRYST, *n.*, Any coaster, book or magazine used to rest a beer on while watching an SF movie on TV.

William G. Raley
Huntington Beach, CA

BRAM, *n.*, A cooked cereal popular among Transylvanian peasants; it is boiled over a fire stoked with batwings.

Tommy J. Walz
E. Calais, VT

PIERS—PRESSURE, *n.*, A compulsion to prove oneself to one's contemporaries by writing dozens of trilogies and multi-part series.

Michael Weiss
W. Bloomfield, MI

HUGONOTS, *n. pl.*, A dissident sect of science fiction writers which believes that literary merit should not be adjudicated by fandom.

Maynard Bates
Fort Smith, Canada

COMPETITION 45 (suggested by Stephen Mendenhall)

Send us up to a dozen variations of SF titles in which one word is replaced by a close homonym. Yes, we are looking for (Harlan, forgive us) puns: E.g. *I, Rabbit*; *A Canned Pickle for Leibowitz* . . .

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Feb. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 45 will appear in the June Issue.

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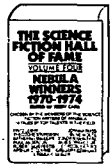

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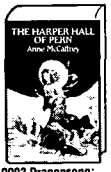

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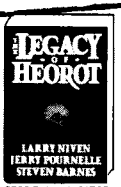

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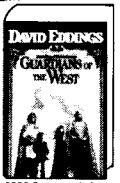

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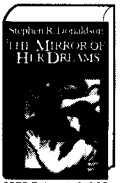

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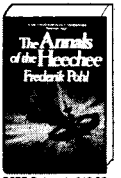

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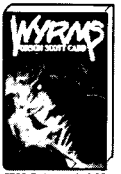

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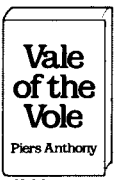

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